



RESEARCH OVERVIEW

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES:

Understanding Women's Participation and Empowerment

Emma Newbury and Tina Wallace
November 2015

Trócaire

Acknowledgements

Trócaire envisages a just and peaceful world where people's dignity is ensured and rights are respected; where basic needs are met and resources are shared equitably; where people have control over their own lives and those in power act for the common good.

Trócaire is the overseas development agency of the Irish Catholic Church.

Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland
Tel. +353 1 629 3333
www.trocaire.org

Northern Ireland Regional Office
50 King Street, Belfast BT1 6AD
Tel .+44 28 9080 8030
Fax. +44 28 9080 8031
Northern Ireland Charity Number XR 10431

Dublin City Resource Centre
12 Cathedral Street, Dublin 1
Tel / Fax : +353 1 874 3875

Munster Resource Centre
9 Cook Street, Cork
Tel .+353 21 427 5622
Fax. +353 21 427 1874
Irish Charity Number CHY 5883

Acknowledgements: Sincere thanks to all the research participants for their time and for sharing their views and experiences with us. Huge thanks also to all of the staff at Trócaire's partners CDJP Matadi, AMDES, APADEIM, SEARCH and BKS the research exists due to your hard work and dedication. Thank you also to all the staff in Trócaire's country offices in DRC, India and Nicaragua and for on-going dedication to the research over the three years. A special thanks to Carol Ballantine, Carol Wrenn, Deirdre Ní Cheallaigh, Farrah Kelly, Finola Finnan, Hilary Daly, Kim Wallis, Niall O Keeffe and Noreen Gumbo for your feedback on the many draft reports.

We gratefully acknowledge programme funds received from Irish Aid and the Department for International Development (UK), along with grants from the Raskob Foundation and CAFOD which contributed to costs associated with this research.

All findings and recommendations contained in this report are the responsibility of Trócaire and do not necessarily represent or reflect the policies of funders.

Contents

Abbreviations	5
Executive Summary	6
1. Introduction	8
1.1 Background to the research	10
1.2 Analytical framework: Participation, Space, Power & Empowerment	11
1.3 Methodology	13
1.4 Environmental context: DRC, India & Nicaragua	15
2. Key research findings across the three countries	17
2.1.1 Governance and Human Rights programme and projects	18
2.1.2 Gender Equality programme and projects	18
2.2 Spaces	19
2.3 Participation and Empowerment: women's journeys	20
2.3.1 Overview of the Journey	21
2.3.2 Case studies of individual women's journeys	25
Case study 1, Césarine, Kinzau Mvute, DRC	25
Case Study 2, Hilda, La Bahiona, Nicaragua	27
Case study 3, Panmati Khilo, Khatapada, India	28
2.4 Barriers and enablers to the empowerment journeys	29
3 Exploring the boundaries for action	39
3.1 Including women without challenging power structures	40
3.1.1 Between Citizens and the State	40
3.1.2 Between Men and Women	41
3.2 Pushing the boundaries	41
3.2.1 Between Citizens and the State	41
3.2.2 Between Men and Women	42
3.3 Recommendations for promoting women's participation and empowerment	43
4 Bibliography	46

Abbreviations

CDJP	Commission for justice and peace
CLD	Local development committee
CLGP	Local Participative Governance Committee
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
GBV	Gender based violence
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
SHG	Self-help group (for savings and loans)
VDC	Village development committee

Executive Summary

Women's participation and empowerment are terms that are used by many agencies including NGOs. The term empowerment was originally used to refer to a process of radical social transformation, whereby excluded social groups could define and claim their rights collectively. Over the years its use has widened and its meaning has become diffused, with the central issue of power being lost. Trócaire, aware of this ambiguity, undertook a three year multi country research on women's participation within decision making spaces at the grassroots level. Empowerment was defined in the research as the process of pushing against the boundaries to shape new fields of possible action, by increasing the capacity of those with less power to engage with those with more power. The research was undertaken in three countries, DRC, India and Nicaragua, implementing governance and gender equality programmes through local partner organisations. It set out to better understand how participation contributes to processes of empowerment and the reduction of oppressive power relations between men and women, as well as citizens and the state.

The research focused on what enabled women to participate in informal community decision-making spaces. A qualitative methodology was designed to facilitate women and the partners to identify the issues of greatest interest and concern to them, and to describe in their own words their experiences of participating in different spaces. Participatory tools were used by partners with groups of women in 2-4 research sites in each of the three countries. The process itself generated changes in the women and the way partners understood and worked with the issues. It facilitated Trócaire's thinking about what participation and empowerment mean in different contexts and how to ensure that the work on this is enabling real change especially in women's ability to influence structures and decisions that shape their lives.

Through listening to women, who are participating within decision-making spaces, analysing their experiences and the social and political barriers which hinder their participation and examining the enablers that support participation, the research maps out the women's different empowerment journeys. These are very varied. Some women only take the first step of leaving the house, but this marks an important shift in their lives. For the majority greater self-esteem enables them to express themselves in different spaces; some even become leaders, recognised by their community for their participation. Many actively lobby their governments for access to basic services like electricity and water and a few even mobilise other women to start their own journeys. Through this analysis comes a clearer understanding of

Trócaire's different approaches to "empowerment"; the role and purpose of promoting participation in different spaces as part of an empowerment process for women, and the specificity of the empowerment journeys in each context.

The research finds that participation and empowerment are in a mutually reinforcing relationship: women's participation within different decision making spaces can support women to gain power but also feeling empowered can lead to women participating in new ways or spaces. Participation in groups, especially women only groups, can support women to build confidence and skills helping them to influence decisions within their households and the wider community.

A number of barriers persist despite women's participation and changes in empowerment. These are all underpinned by gender norms, which of course are contextually specific but across the three countries were seen to result in different forms of: male control over women's mobility, resistance to women's participation within public spaces and unequal division of labour between men and women. To be able to change power relations these underlying gender norms must be addressed alongside support for women to gain confidence and knowledge as it is these fundamental norms that perpetuate women's marginalisation from public decision making.

The nature of the spaces also affect women's participation, and the likelihood of their participation supporting their empowerment, by limiting or enabling their ability to influence decisions and re-address the power imbalance between both men and women and citizens and the state. The research explored the context of women's experiences of participation by analysing: who created the space, who makes the decisions, who can participate and who is excluded. Across the different contexts, a number of characteristics emerged which were more likely to affect the ability of women's participation to support empowerment.

Rigid hierarchies limit the opportunities for women to influence decisions and concentrates power in the hands of a small number of individuals, often men, reinforcing the status quo of male dominance. Programmes can reinforce this by training leaders and expecting a 'trickledown effect', which may just further embed the authority of an elite group.

Infrequent meetings reduce the opportunity for women's voice to influence decisions by limiting the amount of time with decision makers. Some spaces, generally those created for interaction between citizens and local governments, only call meeting once or twice a year they are so infrequent that

the physical opportunities for participation are drastically limited.

A space might provide the opportunity for women to express their needs and they might even be heard by local authorities or community members but unless they have the **power to influence** decisions their participation is tokenistic, serving the rhetoric of citizen participation without delivering influence of change.

For women to be able to push the boundaries of power it is essential for them to have the opportunity to participate, to organise and discuss issues affecting their lives, to explore concepts of women's rights and to analyse how power operates in their lives.

Strategies for promoting women's inclusion in decision-making spaces and increasing their control over their lives need to address the underlying gender norms that perpetuate women's ongoing marginalisation. Additionally programmes need a nuanced understanding of the spaces that exist and the power dynamics which affect them, within a context, to avoid supporting participation in disempowering structures. Women's empowerment journeys do not necessarily correspond to the lifecycle of a programme. Supporting empowerment involves challenging individual, social and cultural norms that are instilled from birth and supported through laws, policies, religious beliefs and local practices and requires a long term approach to programming.

1. Introduction to the research



Maman Sophie Practicing with the cameras during a Photovoice training session in Kinzau Mvuete, DRC

1. Introduction to the research: Participation & empowerment of women in community settings

Participation has been a pillar of development and humanitarian practice and strategies for many years. As a concept and as a tool, it has been discussed, debated and analysed, resulting in multiple expectations regarding what it can achieve. However, the concept remains vague and understood differently in varying contexts. Participation is often used as a broad term, undefined and divorced from its context and from the power relations that shape who is included/excluded, who can speak and be heard and who cannot, who can act and who cannot, and who benefits from participating.

Within the spectrum of gender equality, participation (as an approach) is widely used to organise, promote and empower women in collective settings and to support their engagement with decision-making processes that impact of their lives. However, the shape, objectives and actions of structures and groups that promote women's participation vary widely, and there is no common understanding around the necessary components or such structures and groups (what shape they should take, how much time women need to spend working with them in order to achieve results, what type of participation is required from these women, and how this participation will affect their own lives and that of their communities in tangible ways). Evidence-based research which addresses these issues is limited, as is information on the opportunities and barriers enabling or preventing women and men participating in different settings, or how they can utilise their participation and empowerment to influence decision-makers.

This research addresses some of these shortfalls. An initial literature review of available secondary research on women's participation was conducted to identify the gaps in existing research and this review provided the basis for building the analytical framework for the research. The review explored the key concepts of participation, empowerment and the spaces where individuals participate at community level, and it identified two overriding issues around participation. First, women's voices were largely absent from the literature, and their perspectives and views not adequately captured; and second, existing research looks predominantly at participation in formal political structures, particularly at the national level.

Trócaire was in a strong position to undertake this research, because participation is a core strategy across many of its community-based programmes. Furthermore, Trócaire's implementing partner organisations work with women and men in the communities in which they live, and are themselves part of those communities, and are thus well

placed to listen to and analyse women's voices within their communities. Two of Trócaire's programmes were chosen as the focus of the research on the basis of their stated goals around promotion of women's participation and empowerment at the community level: the Gender Equality programme and the Governance & Human Rights programme.

Clear definitions and understandings of the core concepts that guided the research were developed at the outset: **participation**, **power** and **empowerment**. The nature of spaces in which participation takes place at the local level, and the relationship between participation and power in enabling individual and collective empowerment to take place, was considered. The research was particularly interested in how participation contributes to processes of empowerment and the reduction of oppressive power relations between men and women, as well as citizens and the state. These power relations operate at multiple levels, shaping people's actions, beliefs, and even their aspirations. Power is ubiquitous and often internalized, so that many of the boundaries it creates are not perceptible. Empowerment is the process of pushing against established boundaries to create and shape new fields of possible action. This requires a strengthening of the capacities of those with less power to engage with those with more. As empowerment involves renegotiating boundaries, it is necessary to understand how participation in decision-making structures supports women to push the boundaries of possibility. This research explores these concepts and relationships in decision making spaces where women do or could come together at the community level.

Empowerment was conceived both as a process and as an outcome, serving different purposes: supporting women to engage with existing societal structures and enabling women to challenge the status quo and social norms that prevent their equal participation. Including women in a meaningful way in development fora concentrates on building their confidence and skills to enable them to participate in new activities, which will in turn benefit them and their families and communities. It is a form of empowerment that enables women to become part of the existing social, political and economic structures, where previously they have been excluded. Challenging existing boundaries goes further than this, to achieve structural change by addressing the power structures that cause women's marginalisation and inequality. This involves questioning social norms, building collective voices, taking political action and addressing the systemic structures that uphold gender inequality. A key approach in this is to create new spaces and collective

forms of participation.

Trócaire seeks to contribute to empowerment processes that promote a transformational agenda and addresses the structural causes of women's inequality. Identifying strategies and approaches that promote engagement within the existing structures and those that question and challenge those structures and norms will support new programming towards a more radical shift in women's position in society. To this end, the research process listened to women that participate within decision-making spaces and analysed their experiences of the social, political and economic barriers and enablers which hinder or support their participation. Their varied 'empowerment journeys' provide a deeper understanding of Trócaire's different approaches to "empowerment" and what these approaches can and do achieve.

Women's lives are unique and complex, shaped by their contexts, their aspirations and their control, or lack thereof, over life events. Their stories were varied, positive and negative, exciting and also concerning. Listening to their voices provided a wealth of information from which it was possible to identify overarching trends and themes that have relevance to programming for Trócaire and the wider development community. The process also enriched the understanding and knowledge of Trócaire staff and partner organisations, and of programmes and policies, during the lifetime of the research project.

1.1 Background to the research

Gender Equality and Governance and Human Rights represent two of the five strategic programme areas under Trócaire's 2012-2016 Strategic Plan. Both programmes address issues of citizen participation as key to empowerment, but they conceive the relationship between participation and empowerment in different ways. For the Gender Programme, empowerment is the end goal, while for the Governance programme empowerment is the mechanism to achieve participation. Against this background, in 2012, Trócaire initiated a three year research project in order to better understand programming on women's participation at community level and how it interacts with empowerment and political engagement across the two programme areas.¹ The project was to focus on women's participation in decision making spaces in three selected countries: India,

the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Nicaragua, with a view to informing future programming and policies with evidence based research findings and robust analysis.

As noted above, an initial literature review of available secondary research on women's participation identified the absence of women's perspectives and predominantly addressed participation in formal political structures, particularly at the national level. Far less evidence or research was available regarding the promotion of women's participation within their communities². A 2015 review of literature and learning on these topics from the Overseas Development Institute concluded that the process through which women's participation becomes meaningfully able to influence decisions is still a 'black box' with limited understanding of what happens in informal spaces and how this is of value to women and gender equality agendas (Domingo, 2015).

Trócaire's international programmes were also mapped, revealing that the majority of Trócaire's work supporting women's participation happened at the grassroots level and focused on supporting community mobilisation through organising and training. Staff surveyed reported a perception that the barriers for women to participate resulted from women's lack of confidence and their low skill-set and knowledge. Correspondingly, a core assumption prevailed that working to address these issues would enable women to participate and exercise influence over decisions affecting their lives or that of their community. Broadly, the causes of women's marginalisation in political processes at all levels were perceived by staff to be rooted within the women themselves. As a consequence, insufficient work was being done to address the structural barriers to women's participation rooted in laws, policies, and practices of discrimination.

Against this contextual background, the research focused on what enables women to participate and exert influence in informal community decision-making spaces. A participatory methodology was designed to prioritise women's views and experiences, to understand how participation happened, how this supported women's empowerment, and, how empowerment enabled more effective participation at community level.

1.1.1 Objectives of the research

The purpose of the research was to bring women's voices and experiences to the fore to inform, in a usable and

1 This research did not look at other gender mainstreaming strategies or gender as a cross cutting issue. Instead, it looked at three programmes – two of them dedicated Governance and Human Rights Programmes and one of them a dedicated Gender Based Violence Programme, as the main focus was to ensure a better understanding of participation in decision making structures and how Trócaire and its partners understand and support 'empowerment'.

2 In the time that has lapsed since the research started, new materials have been published by Oxfam and the Institute of Development Studies regarding the importance of working with and listening to women at community level, to understand the complexity of their lives. See Overseas Development Institute (Pilar Domingo et al), "Women's voice and leadership in decision-making Assessing the evidence," March 2015, available at <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9627.pdf>; Duncan Green/Oxfam, "The Raising her Voice Global Programme," January 2015, available at <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/the-raising-her-voice-global-programme-338444>.

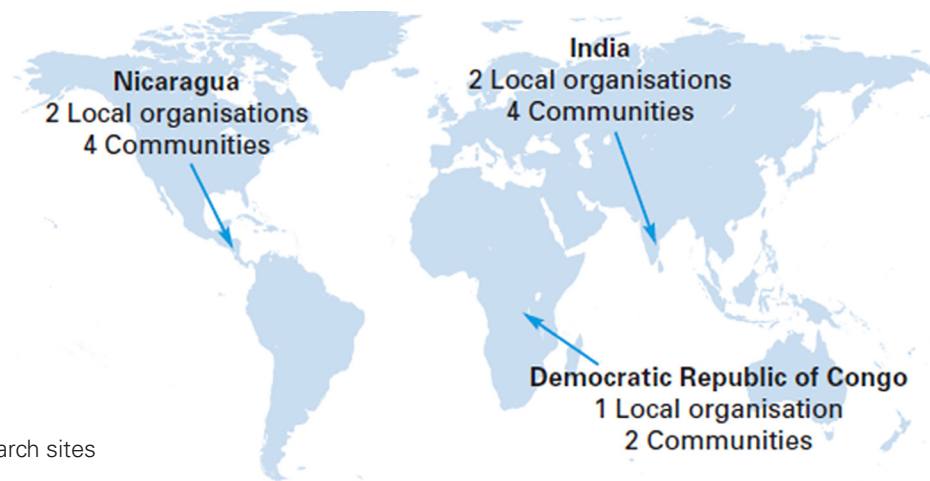


Figure 1: Research sites

practical way, the issues to be addressed in programming for women's participation and empowerment. The research aimed to deepen understanding of participation and empowerment at the community levels in order to improve the policy and practice, especially related to women's participation in decision-making spaces, and in particular around decision-making that affected their own lives.

Specifically this research aimed to:

- Map and understand the spaces where women were able to participate;
- Explore the barriers and enabling factors for women's participation in public decision-making spaces at the community and local levels;
- Investigate Trócaire's strategies to enable women to participate in decision-making spaces, to capture learning and identify good practice and the challenges in Trócaire's programmes;
- Explore the effects of participation in these spaces on individual women's lives and the communities they live in, including understanding better how empowering it is and what changes it enables for women.

1.2 Analytical framework: Participation, Space, Power & Empowerment

The research was specifically interested in how participation contributes to processes of empowerment and the reduction of oppressive power relations between men and women, and between citizens and the state. The initial literature review on women's participation identified multiple, and sometimes vague, definitions and understandings of participation and empowerment. Thus, an analytical framework was developed to guide this research, which defined three core concepts: participation, space and power.

Drawing on the work of Gaventa (2004) and the concept of



'citizenship participation', an approach that reflects Trócaire's rights based approach, participation is understood as the creation of new opportunities for citizens to gain the power to influence decisions that affect their lives. The goal is "the collective and participatory engagement of citizens in the determination of the affairs of their community" (Dietz, 1987). Citizen participation creates opportunities for participation to support empowerment by involving typically excluded individuals and groups in decision-making forums to influence issues that affect their lives, and giving access to power for those who are so often marginalised. The process, experience and nature of citizen participation varies widely between different communities and is determined by the women and men in each different context.

To situate participation within lived experiences the research draws on Cornwall's (2002) seminal work on 'spaces'. This theory regards participation as a spatial practice that occurs in bounded yet permeable arenas. Cornwall's taxonomy of spaces provides a framework for the research to explore what concrete opportunities there are for participation: where the space is and who created it, what rules govern each space and how these rules affect access to the space, who can participate, and who makes the decisions within each space.

The taxonomy divides spaces into three types, which provides a tool to map the different spaces in each context and understand where participation can take place, and who has the power to control the space and set the rules for who may or may not join, speak and be heard.

- **Closed spaces:** these spaces are difficult to enter. The rules ensure that only specific actors can enter the spaces, often because they hold a specific role or have a particular type of experience. Within these spaces, decisions are taken only by the actors allowed access to these spaces and are made behind closed doors (for example, the law courts, cabinet, boards of trustees). They are established within Government machineries or by specific professions or organisations.



- **Invited spaces:** these are spaces created by agencies external to the community (such as local or district government or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)) in which people are invited to participate; the rules are set by the agencies that create them. They are often constructed to be open and to include people usually excluded from more formal closed spaces; they are designed to give new opportunities, often to women, to participate in decision-making (for example village planning committees, parent teacher associations, water user groups, women's groups). 
- **Claimed/organic spaces:** these are spaces created by the people themselves, often to build unity and to challenge power holders; they are united around a common cause. These are collective and popular spaces run by people themselves, where the rules of entry and behaviour are set by them. They can be open to all or focused on specific groups such as refugees, the elderly, women or youth groups. They can be ad hoc or established, long or short term (for example lobbying groups, protest groups, self-help groups addressing urgent service gaps). 

Some spaces are fluid: they may begin as organic and later be transformed into invited spaces, especially when outside agencies begin to support the work. They may start as invited spaces and later become more organic, such as when projects come to an end. Closed spaces are usually much more fixed in nature.

Recognising that participation does not occur in a vacuum but as part of the social world where power dynamics shape the boundaries of action, the analytical framework drew on debates about the ubiquitous and complex nature of power and domination. These debates facilitate an understanding of the potential that spaces, and women's participation in these spaces, provide for influencing decision-making and supporting the transformation of power relations. Four types of power were identified:

- **'Power over'** is the most commonly discussed form of power and refers to domination, control and repression to varying degrees. This form of power is regarded as a negative force that controls the oppressed person's ability to take action.
- **'Power within'** is the internal capacity that all humans possess; without this all other types of power are not possible. Self-confidence and self-worth are regarded as measures of 'power within.'
- **'Power to'** refers to the unique potential of every person to be able to take action to influence their world and can be considered as the visible manifestation of 'power within.'

- **'Power with'** refers to the power created through collective action, where the whole is greater than the sum of the individuals.

Power is understood as complex, negotiable and responsive to peoples' actions, although the pervasive nature of 'power over' in relation to both male and female relations and relations between the citizen and the state is recognised as real and often resistant to change.

The research defined **empowerment** as a process rather than a state of being: "a political and material process which increases individual and group power, self-reliance and strength" (Ferguson, 2004, 1). Empowerment is understood as a process of pushing against the boundaries of power to shape new fields of possible action; it is also the outcome of this process which sees shifts from oppressive 'power over' relations to more fluid power relations where changes can occur and power can be negotiated through the increase in the three forms of transformational power (power within, power with and power to).

One might envision a continuum of power relations on which domination forms one end-point. At the opposite end would be the fluid power relation defined by social boundaries that are understood by all participants and that allow the maximum possible space, not only for action within, but also effective action upon the boundaries themselves. (Hayward, 1998, 21)

This analytical framework allows for an exploration of how far participation promotes women's empowerment and contributes to a decrease in exclusive male and state domination (power over) to a situation where power can be negotiated by and with women to address their immediate and long term needs.

There are different purposes and objectives associated with promoting changes in women's power and it is important to clarify where the current approaches to women's empowerment within Trócaire and the NGO sector sit. At one end of the spectrum proponents of empowerment argue that if women can be brought into participating in existing structures, through making changes to both external and internal constraints, then they will have the power to influence decisions that directly affect their lives and interests. This approach aims to improve women's lives by integrating them into existing decision-making and other structures from which they have previously been excluded. The purpose is to increase their access to services, resources and decisions by building their confidence, self-esteem and understanding. At the other end of the empowerment spectrum it is argued that to achieve transformational change women need to do more than work within existing structures, they need to be aware of, understand and challenge the causes – not only the symptoms- of their inequality and exclusion. Transformational change requires challenging existing social norms and the structures of inequality that disempower them, at every level from the

household to the national. It requires confidence and self-esteem but also an understanding of the structural causes of their exclusion and working to address these through collective action. Women's inequality is understood to rest as much in structural barriers as in women's lack of confidence and self-belief.

These concepts provide the conceptual structure for the report and enable the analysis of the very different experiences of the women in the three diverse research contexts. While the aims of different empowerment programmes may differ and sit in different places along a continuum from working within the status quo to pushing the boundaries, in practice the work shares many methods and approaches. While each end of the spectrum is rooted in very different understandings of empowerment and each has different overall goals and often uses different methodologies, there are nevertheless commonalities between them in practical programming.

1.3 Methodology

The research used a set of qualitative research tools that were designed to enable women and Trócaire's partner organisations to identify and explore the issues of greatest interest and concern to them, and to speak in their own words about their experiences of participating in different spaces. They were encouraged to explore how this engagement affected their ability to negotiate with decision makers and their wider lives.

1.3.1 Selection of partner organisations, communities and individual participants

In order to select the partner organisations, communities and women to participate in this project, the research process was preceded by a mapping exercise. This mapping reviewed Trócaire's Gender Equality and Governance and Human Rights programmes, identifying those which create spaces for women to collectively work towards participating in and influencing governance processes, or which build awareness and confidence of women with a view to engaging in governance processes in the future. On

the basis of this review, three countries were selected for detailed case study.³

Within each case study country, partner organisations were selected to undertake the research jointly with Trócaire.⁴ Following the induction of partner organisations into the research project, a mapping of the communities they worked with was repeated at the country level. Through a carefully developed set of criteria and the implementation of a ranking exercise using these criteria, one or a few communities representing a variety of different characteristics and contexts were selected in each case study country.⁵ This careful process of sampling continued throughout the research process at each level, to ensure that those involved in the research spanned the diversity of the groups and the women involved in Trócaire supported projects.

The majority of data collection was implemented by Trócaire's partner organisations, with the support of the lead researcher, local consultants and Trócaire programme staff. The partners' knowledge of the programmes and of the communities was critical to facilitate access to the women that participated in the project, and to gain their trust, which was essential to ensure an honest and robust dialogue. In some cases the partners knew the women very well, in others less so, largely depending on their geographical proximity and language barriers. While selection and attitudinal biases are difficult to avoid completely, the research methodology mitigated these risks by conducting the research over a long period of time (between 11 and 14 months in each community), to allow the women to develop the confidence to speak honestly and openly. Moreover, the methodology was designed to capture the voices of these participants, through the use of audio clipping, video recordings and diaries that the participants controlled themselves.

Throughout this report, where the research findings are discussed, there are references to 'the women' as a group of respondents, to 'the communities' and 'the projects'. Unless otherwise stated, these refer exclusively to the women, projects and communities that took part in the research project, and are not intended to represent the wider populations.

3 The final selection was based on a set of pre-determined criteria: representation of Trócaire's geographical spread; diversity of strategies focused on women's participation; inclusion of Gender Equality and Governance & Human Rights programmes within the Trócaire country programme; and a stated commitment to undertake and support data collection and analysis.

4 The final selection was based on a set of pre-determined criteria: ongoing implementation of strategies to encourage women's participation in decision making spaces at the community level; commitment to participatory principles; demonstrable belief that programme strategies will provide learning for other programmes; willingness to dedicate time to conducting the research; and, regular engagement with target communities. Final selection of partners that met the above criteria was also guided by logistical and financial constraints and opportunities.

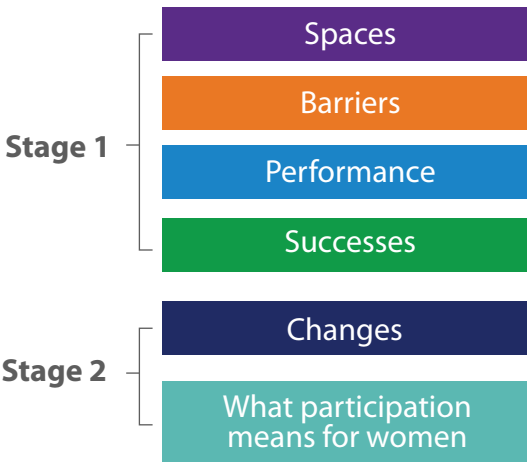
5 The ranking exercise relied on an analysis of socio-economic factors and regional contexts, including: access to infrastructure, levels of violence, unemployment rates, migration and quality of schooling.

1.3.2 Data Collection & Support for Partner Organisations

Considerable time was dedicated at the outset to training partner organisations on a range of ‘Participatory Rural Appraisal’ (PRA), including mapping, ranking and focus group discussions. While Trócaire expected that these tools would be familiar to partner organisations, given their use of participatory methods in their work, in practice, all of the partners were unfamiliar with PRA and lacked experience in participatory principles and techniques. Trócaire has heavily invested in results based management and one unforeseen consequence has been prioritisation of quantitative measures and a lack of investment in qualitative participatory methods.

In each context, research tools were selected by the partner organisations on the basis of which they found most interesting and relevant to the women they worked with. To ensure consistency across communities and countries, an overall research framework guided the methodology. Throughout the research, Trócaire continued to invest in the participatory and data collection skills of partners, and communication was ongoing between the partner organisations, Trócaire country office, the lead researcher based in Trócaire HQ, local consultants and women participants. Over the 3-year lifetime of the research project, the lead researcher undertook between two and four visits to each case study country.

Figure 2: Research framework



At each stage of the research, the involvement and agreement of all those participating was essential to a successful research process, to learn from and analyse the data, and to identify what issues were of most importance to the women, to partners and to Trócaire in its programming.

Understanding of the issues and activities changed over the course of the research on the basis of ongoing lessons

learned through this action research. One of the biggest changes that partner staff experienced throughout the lifetime of the project was a deeper understanding of and commitment to gender equality. The majority of the staff of partner organisations that engaged with the project were not gender specialists, and the (predominately male) staff members had limited expertise in gender equality when the research started. This lack of knowledge and expertise was apparent in their project strategies and implementation programmes. Throughout the course of the research, partner staff reported a deeper understanding of the specific needs associated with tackling gender equality and of the barriers that women face at both a personal and professional level.

“I was listening to one of the women talk about her husband denying her permission to participate, and how she would get so upset she would be crying on her bed and her young daughter would comfort her. I realised that this is how I was with my wife, I didn’t like her to visit her family and I was just like her husband. I knew I had to change things in my own life.”
Partner staff member, Nicaragua

1.3.3 Challenges

There were of course many challenges. Geographical distance and staff turnover at partner organisations affected the data collection process. The challenge of language was significant, requiring translation across two languages in some project locations and on the use of translators who are not always easily available in each context and were not always familiar with development concepts. Significant bodies of data were recorded and later transcribed to ensure accurate reporting, but this task was time consuming and relied on availability of translators. Through the translation process, there is a risk that some of the subtle nuances have been lost. Over the three country locations, relatively small sample sizes were surveyed, typically small groups of women from a number of communities within one or two regions. The findings are nevertheless indicative of trends within and across the three countries that were studied.

While Trócaire staff and the staff of partner organisations are familiar with local contexts and communities and were essential to the project for that reasons, their own inherent biases or perceptions may have influenced some of the feedback from the participants at times. Not all staff that supported the research were familiar with participatory methodology and issues related to gender (in)equality, and some required intense support as a result. As in all aspects of development work, staff operate in complex and demanding programmes, and have to balance their research responsibilities with the demands of these programmes and their wider work.

1.4 Environmental context: DRC, India & Nicaragua

Each of the three case study countries are characterised by unique political and cultural realities, and different socio-cultural factors that shape women's lives and the opportunities and barriers they encounter. Two issues emerge as the most dominant forces: the political context and the patriarchal nature of each of the countries.

1.4.1 Political context

All three societies analysed were patriarchal with rigid gender norms that largely limit women's role in their communities to domestic and productive tasks. Women's roles and responsibilities are tightly circumscribed and upheld through socialisation from birth. They are marginalised because of their inequality, which is widely accepted by individuals and communities, and in all three countries they are more likely to live in poverty, to be illiterate and to possess fewer material assets than men. This continues despite national legislation that theoretically provides women with equal rights to property, education and work. Additionally, although each country has laws criminalising, at least some forms of, violence against women, it remains an everyday reality for many women as demonstrated by high levels of femicide, rape and domestic violence. Men often exercise psychological forms of violence by controlling women's behaviour and mobility, ensuring that their wives and daughters follow the accepted rules that govern

perceptions about what it means to be a 'good woman' and a 'good wife'.

The opportunities for women to participate are also heavily influenced by the wider political context in each country. The concepts of decentralisation and citizen participation exist in all three countries but in reality only India has comprehensively rolled out a decentralised system of governance. India has implemented legislation giving citizens the right to elect representatives from the village level to the national level and also enshrined their legal right to participate in local government decisions, right down to the village level. However, while the spaces for interaction with the state on all issues have been established, the nature of the decisions being addressed are often limited to access to government entitlements for the poor. Participation in these decentralised spaces is accepted and used, though usually by men, for ensuring access to basic rights as outlined by the state, while the decisions are typically made at higher levels. Including women in these higher level spaces, in the rural areas of India studied in this project, was a challenge; despite the existence of gender quotas, inclusion of women through Trócaire-supported programmes was a new initiative in the Koraput region of the state of Odisha.

Nicaragua has also made a commitment to citizen participation through legislation and has initiated processes to decentralise decision-making. Citizens legally have the right to elect municipal authorities and influence municipal plans. However, there is no national legal framework guiding decentralisation, meaning that the responsibilities of national and local governments are not clearly laid out. Additionally central government edicts have created various community based governance structures which have been heavily criticised and accused of being partisan and promoting the Sandinista party.

Democracy has been blighted in DRC through authoritarian rule and ongoing conflict. Decentralisation is planned but the roll out has stalled and no local elections have taken place; instead a political system of appointed leaders exists in place of elected representatives and no state-supported space exists at the local level for citizens to meet with them to influence government plans. This lack of open and available decision-making spaces for citizens to engage with local government on key issues affecting their lives means there are few state-supported spaces for women to participate in.

Citizen-state relations vary in each context, shaping the opportunities for participation and influence. These political realities shape the possibilities for women and men to engage with the state around decision-making and political participation: DRC has limited decentralisation as yet, and few political opportunities for women to engage with; Nicaragua has decentralisation structures in place but it is somewhat piecemeal and with limited room for participation and negotiation to influence decisions at the local level;



Women in the literacy centre in Matadi, DRC, completing a paired ranking activity.
Photo: Emma Newbury.

India has more structured and embedded opportunities for engagement with the state, but in the areas of India where the research took place women are marginalised and usually excluded from such spaces by virtue of their ethnicity/caste and their gender.

1.4.2 Socio-economic context

The socio-economic situation of the women themselves is also diverse. Access to services is very uneven, with those in rural areas often worse off than those living in or close to towns. However, health care for women was limited in all areas and access was infringed either by the lack of facilities, or because of fees for medical services, which are a major barrier for the poor. Detailed socio-economic data on the research sites was not available; thus, very specific local information on health, education, social welfare provisions were not known; however, women did talk about their lack of access to services, especially health and most of the communities lacked access to reliable basic services such as water and electricity.

Education and literacy levels of women varied widely. In India levels of illiteracy were very high and the women surveyed were almost all illiterate. In Nicaragua and DRC, the majority of women surveyed had received primary education and a minority had attended some secondary school education. In Nicaragua, the women had been educated in Spanish, their mother tongue, making communication beyond their local context easy. In DRC and India, language barriers are a challenge to development because of the multiplicity of language and the need for translation. Women often do not speak or understand the lingua franca.

Religion, religious leaders and religious teaching were critical factors influencing beliefs and behaviour in each context, including regarding women's beliefs about themselves and their place in the society. In Nicaragua, Catholicism and Evangelicalism are the dominant religions in the communities surveyed; in DRC, the communities ascribed to a mix of religions including Christian churches of different denominations and Islam; in India, the sample sites were either Hindu or Animist.

Poverty is rife in all communities sampled and, although some of the women's families may have owned small plots of land for subsistence, their overall assets were minimal and very unlikely to be in the women's names. Most

women in the research were not employed outside of the home and were reliant on their partners' income, although in DRC, the majority of the women in the research sample worked outside of the home, in a variety of jobs ranging from market seller to civil servant. For them, it was common and accepted to participate in public spaces outside of the home, and many of the women had greater education than the women surveyed in India and Nicaragua. In India, 81% worked in their family fields and 19% were engaged in micro-business, such as tea selling and snack selling. In Nicaragua, 65% of women did not work outside the home while 45% worked in agriculture either at home or outside their home as day labourers or involved in the informal market selling vegetables or washing clothes. Most of their time was spent dealing with domestic responsibilities. These differences in time-use and employment affected women's opportunities to participate in public decision making spaces. Mobility was an issue that differed dramatically between countries, with women in DRC having the greatest freedom and mobility while women in Nicaragua had the least freedom, many rarely leaving their communities.

Contextual differences shape the possibilities of women's actions. An educated woman in an urban setting in DRC is likely to have more choice in her life than an illiterate tribal woman in India. However, the woman in India has legal rights to influence government decisions regarding her communities' development in ways denied in DRC; this in theory giving her more power over decisions. It is essential in reading this report to keep in mind the wide differences in context and history, the opportunities and barriers in each country, and the very different starting points for the individual women that joined groups and embarked on journeys of participation and empowerment.

2. The research findings across the three countries



Women of the SHG, Kharaguda, India. Photo: SEARCH

2. The research findings across the three countries

The detailed findings and case studies for each country are presented in three individual country reports. The findings presented here are a synopsis of the main themes and issues that emerged from these detailed country case studies. This overview is intended to highlight the range of experiences and the diversity of contexts to identify key trends emerging with a view to supporting future policy making and programming. The findings presented are based on the evidence collected by the many case studies and exercises that captured women's own experiences and challenges, but these individual examples are not included here.

Sections 2.1 and 2.2 synthesise Trócaire programmes and the wide array of spaces that provide opportunity for engagement of that shape women's experience of engagement. Section 2.3 presents an overview of the women's empowerment journeys and individual case studies which illustrate those journeys in practice. Section 2.4 summarises the most commonly cited barriers and enablers affecting those journeys.

2.1 The Trócaire gender and governance programmes that shaped women's experiences

The projects run by the Gender and Governance teams structured much of the women's experience of participation at the local level, and so provide an essential part of the overall context.

2.1.1 Governance and Human Rights programme and projects

Trócaire's Governance and Human Rights policy and strategy states that "participatory, rights bearing forms of citizenship will contribute to more accountable forms of governance, which in turn will be pro-poor" (Trócaire, 2011). To that end, the programme aims to empower women and men to demand that states are more participatory, accountable and responsive, in order to improve service delivery or promote more accountable governance. This objective is mirrored in each of the four partner organisations affiliated with this research that were delivering projects under Trócaire's Governance and Human Rights programme. Trócaire's Governance Policy and Strategy takes as a starting point the assumption that people must be empowered before they can demand that state structures become more

participatory, accountable and responsive. However, neither the Governance Policy and Strategy, nor the project documents, explain or define the term empowerment, or address what role participation plays in supporting it. The documents do not clearly explain what changes to women's empowerment would look like in practice and this lack of clarity has impeded the development of well-defined aims and methods to actively support women's empowerment. The focus is often on the individual citizen and his/her actions, rather than on the political spaces in which they are to participate as gendered actors with very different opportunities for accessing and working in public spaces.

Trócaire's Governance and Human Rights Programme Policy and Strategy does place gender equality as central to achieving its objectives, and emphasises the need to empower women to participate alongside men:

"Work with both men and women to promote changes in attitudes, behaviours and norms in order to achieve a more equitable participation of women in decision-making. Support women to be effective and representative leadership roles in decision-making at community and higher levels."
(2011, p24)

However, not all the projects articulate clearly how or why this is needed. Although the projects identify unequal norms around women's participation in public life as a specific barrier to women's participation, they have not developed specific strategies to address these norms. Instead, the projects have tended to focus on dealing with women's own personal limitations, by tackling issues such as illiteracy and lack of knowledge. There has been training on rights for women and work to support people, including women, to organise by creating community-based organisations. The assumption underpinning these strategies is that if women know their rights and are provided with a collective space to identify problems, they will then be able to claim those rights. However, this assumption fundamentally ignores the specific barriers, highlighted in the Governance Programme Policy and Strategy, which negatively affect women, and the roles that unequal power and existing gender norms play in underpinning the barriers to women's participation.

2.1.2 Gender Equality programme and projects

Trócaire's Gender Equality policy and strategy focuses on the transformation of power relations between men and

women, by addressing the underlying beliefs, practices and power imbalances that drive and sustain inequality. Within this policy and strategy, supporting women's empowerment is one of three approaches used to address unequal power relations, along with gender mainstreaming and addressing gender based violence. Empowerment is considered to be necessary within the personal, political, social, economic and legal spheres. The intended outcome of such empowerment for women is that their vulnerability to disadvantage, exploitation and violence is reduced. However, as with the Governance and Human Rights Programme, the concept of empowerment is not defined within the Gender Equality policy and strategy paper, and no details are provided regarding the specific processes needed for contributing to women's empowerment.

The two gender programmes included in this research study are specifically focused on preventing gender-based violence (GBV) by supporting women's empowerment. The objective of these projects is to transform relations between men and women, in order to reduce gender inequality and GBV. To this end, the projects address the underlying attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate gender inequality. Working with men, women and community leaders, issues such as male control, the division of labour within the household, violence and protection of women's human rights are explored as ways to change attitudes and behaviours which perpetuate gender inequality.

These projects have worked with women on personal empowerment, but beyond rights awareness, there is no articulation of how their empowerment will be supported in the political, social, economic and legal spheres. The lack of clarity about the process of empowerment within the equality policy and strategy paper is reflected in the projects. The projects' theory of change assumes that the project interventions will empower women to participate in public decision-making spaces, and through that participation will address issues of violence at a structural level. There are no specific strategies beyond rights awareness to facilitate this process, and the assumption that once women are empowered to participate in public spaces they will automatically prioritise addressing structural impediments to ending gender violence and promoting gender equality is untested.

Both the governance and human rights and the gender projects fail to adequately address the power imbalance between citizens and the state, and between women and men, and their implications for participation. The projects have limited strategies for supporting mechanisms to ensure that women have the power to hold governments to account, despite this being a key aim of the governance projects and an assumption in the gender projects. The projects assume that empowering women to participate will lead to improved governance, without due regard for the reality that participation can be tokenistic and sometimes even disempowering, particularly when the governance systems itself is weak. Without strategies to support people to redress the power between citizens and the state, women and men, a fundamental ingredient of empowerment - power - is missing.

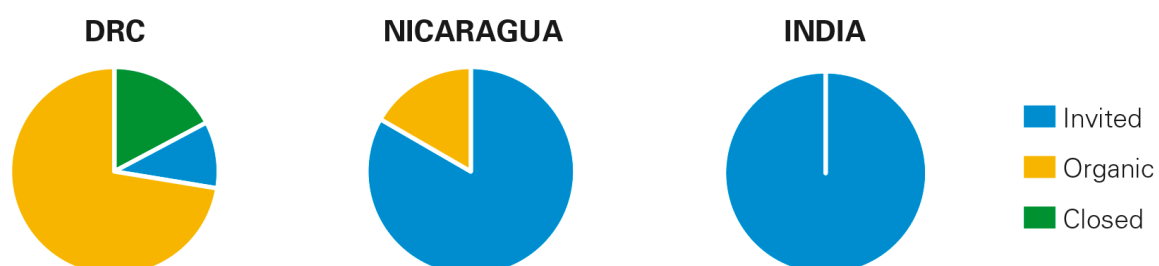
Notably, the ways in which Trócaire works with women at community level varies according to whether the work is part of a governance and human rights or a gender equality project, in part due to the lack of a consistent understanding of empowerment and the role of participation. This was reflected in the challenges encountered in developing a shared approach and framework for the research. Internal bureaucratic silos also have a direct impact on the work being done on the ground, and this experienced at all levels during the research project.

2.2 Spaces

Women's participation is shaped by the spaces that exist for them to participate in. These spaces are not neutral, but are embedded within the complex power structures of the society; they can support participation that leads to empowerment and they can also impede it.

Andrea Cornwall's taxonomy of closed, invited and organic spaces helps to define and explain types of spaces. In each of the case study programmes and projects that were part of this research, the spaces available to women are different, determined by the political, social, and legal structures in each country and region. This context then shapes the existence, type and purpose of spaces, as well as the access that different groups have to them.

Figure 3: Different types of spaces identified for study in the research





As the diagrams show, the type of spaces that women mapped out as being important in their lives varied substantially across case studies, which should be considered against the backdrop of the varied environmental contexts in each country. In both Nicaragua and India, the majority of spaces that were explored are invited; they were either created by the government or NGOs. In both countries, decentralised structures exist and there are official invited spaces for citizens to engage with the government. In DRC, because the plans for decentralization have not yet been rolled out, there are no official invited spaces for citizens to interact with state institutions. Therefore, in DRC the only invited spaces observed by the research project were created by Trócaire's partner organisation, and the closed spaces were run by the local authorities selected to govern the area. The prevalence of organic spaces needs to be understood against the historical context: during the Mobutu years, corruption and a dysfunctional state meant many basic needs remained unmet and organic spaces emerged to fill the gap, providing alternative solutions for men and women to address issues of concern to them.

This taxonomy provides a useful map of the opportunities available for women's participation in different spaces. However, in order to understand how women use, and engage with, these spaces, it is necessary to explore what they offer women in practice, and the complexities of the

power relations that shape women's participation and their journeys of empowerment within these different spaces.

2.3 Participation and Empowerment: women's journeys

As a result of the women's participation in the different spaces, they have all entered into journeys of empowerment. An overall schematic model of the process of empowerment, as it relates to women's participation, has been developed from the evidence collected across the three contexts. The different parts of the journey are not steps in a linear model; each stage interacts with the others in the journey, some women may skip steps, others may have additional steps, and some may only reach the first steps. However, this overall model helps to track and understand women's experiences by highlighting the barriers and enablers to women's participation at each stage and how these affect their empowerment. Some women face greater barriers, others have more support and are better able to exercise the power that they have gained. These different factors then intersect with the opportunities and limitations of the spaces to define what is possible through individual and collective participation.

It is important to recognise that women may take risks when they take steps in the journey, and that there can be

a backlash when they challenge social norms or existing practices. This can push some women back into the home and out of the spaces; for others it can lead to more male control of their activities and pressure from the community to conform to gender norms.

2.3.1 Overview of the Journey

In the home

The first stage, within any of the women's empowerment journeys, is leaving the house. This may not be the direct result of Trócaire's partners' project interventions; a number of women had already taken this step before they joined the project. However, it is the critical first step in the journey and may represent a major change in the women's lives. Many women are only active in the domestic realm, where they undertake productive and reproductive work; for many, moving beyond this sphere is difficult because of accepted gender roles and responsibilities. Until they leave this private space, they have little or no involvement in public decision-making spaces, and for many women this can be a huge step, one that requires courage and real commitment to getting involved in decision making beyond the home.

Within each country context, there are many issues that affect the likelihood of women being able to take this first step, leave the home and enter into public decision-making spaces. Issues such as the social norms around women's mobility, women's access to education, whether it is acceptable for women to work outside the household, and government policies aimed at promoting women's participation outside the home, are all relevant. In each

country context, these factors played a role in how easy or difficult it was for women to participate. Two of the most critical issues that affected women's ease of leaving home in order to participate in public spaces were the labour context and the availability of spaces.

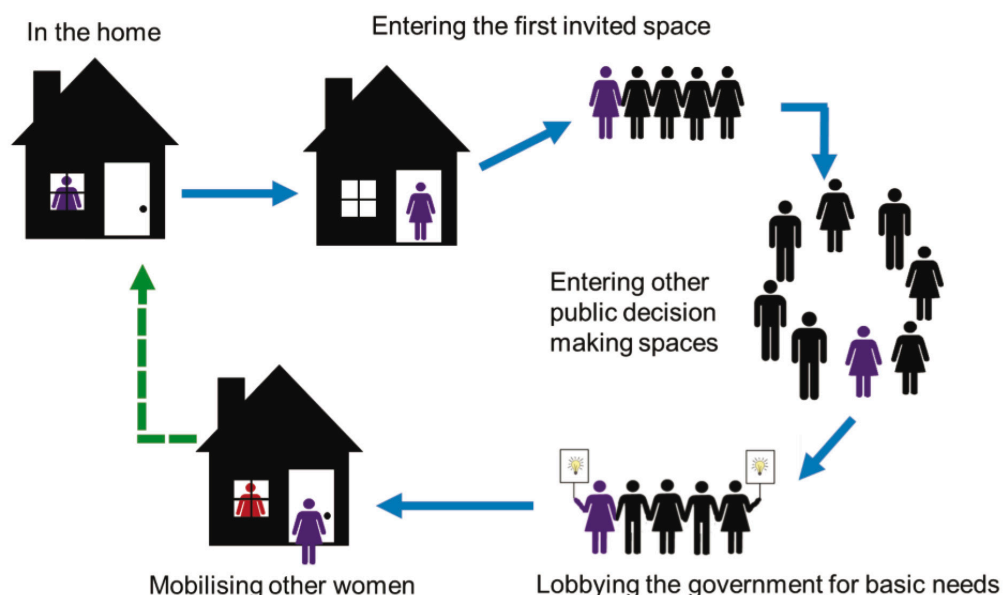
i. The labour context: in DRC, the majority of women in the sample are working outside of the home and receiving financial reimbursement for this, with many engaged in the formal labour market. In Nicaragua, in contrast, most women contacted are only involved in domestic labour within their own household, while in India most of the women met are providing agricultural labour within family fields and not receiving financial compensation for their work. In Nicaragua and India, even if women worked outside the home in agricultural or domestic labour, they were not part of the public decision-making spaces in their community. Patriarchal norms excluded women from decision-making spaces in the community; these were male domains which women did not enter.

"We wouldn't go. They used to say women would upset men if they came to the meeting"

Female Participant, Kirsal India

ii. The availability of spaces: as illustrated above, in DRC, there are many organic spaces for women to participate in, because of the political context and the differences in opportunity within an urban environment. All of the women were part of at least one of these public spaces, although it is not regarded as acceptable for women to be in decision-making roles regarding community-wide affairs. In India and Nicaragua, a significant number of the spaces studied in the research are formal government

Figure 4: Women's participation and empowerment journey



forums where women are traditionally not present and few organic spaces existed, limiting the opportunities for women to participate before Trócaire's project interventions started.

In DRC, the first step was not such a difficult shift because there were many different organic spaces for women to participate in. In India and Nicaragua, taking this first step was much more dramatic, since most women were not involved in the public space. In Nicaragua, gender norms dictate that a "good woman" is modest and works within the home to support her husband and children. For many women, this exclusion from public life left them with low self-esteem, often experiencing violent intimate relationships and having very little control over the decisions that affected their lives or communities.

*"I didn't participate, apart from my housework; I didn't go out, I didn't have a relationship with anyone. I didn't have friendships because I didn't go out."*⁶

Participant, Campirano, Nicaragua

The women have to take the decision to change this situation, to choose to participate. The women can only make this step themselves and they must have sufficient 'power within' and 'power to' to make this move. The decision to do so was generally prompted by a request to join an invited space by an NGO; most of the women in India and Nicaragua started their journeys after the invitation to join a Trócaire project. Taking the decision is one step for women; a second is that to successfully leave the house, they must negotiate with their partners. This is often an ongoing negotiation; it can be very fraught and continue throughout their journeys, and is one reason for some women to give up. Permission is not a one-off agreement, and may have to be repeatedly discussed.

Entering the first invited space

The women reported that they generally gained confidence and skills by participating in informal safe spaces, often but not always invited spaces set up by NGOs that are for women only. These spaces play a vital role in supporting the women to overcome the barriers that prevent them from entering more formal public spaces.

Nearly all the women reported gaining confidence from participating within these safe spaces. This confidence comes from the experience of participating itself, and also from new knowledge that they gain in these spaces; this knowledge varied depending on the particular space created. Women use their new found knowledge and confidence to express themselves without being timid.

"When we formed the VDC, it helped us to overcome the fear and shyness. In the VDC meetings, we learnt to speak."

Participant, India

For some of the women in DRC and Nicaragua, the knowledge and experience they gained in these spaces raised their awareness about the oppression they experience as women, particularly in relation to making decisions in the home. As a result, many individually started to demand changes in their homes and relationships, challenging gender expectations.

"Now it's, maybe, a little less than half of what it was before. But before, God forbid, the power of men, the machismo of men... It's different now, because most of us women are organized. The culture of the man has been, 'I'm the man, and I'm the one who decides'. But to that I say, 'Wait a minute, so you're the one that decides, but about what? The cows? The oxen? Those things might be your iron (role), but that doesn't mean you can treat me like some doll, taking me here, taking me there'. Now I can say no to this. I don't accept it."

Participant, Nicaragua.

In India, although the women felt that their confidence to express themselves had changed through participation in these invited spaces, the majority of the women did not report changes in their critical awareness of the power of men over their lives. The knowledge they gained was centred on working with local governance systems and accessing their benefits and entitlements; this did not spark a critical consciousness of how their lack of power (rooted in inequality) limits their choices. The only change in their home lives was that they could obtain permission to participate in meetings, but this change had mainly come about because of the local organisations insistence that women were needed to access entitlements, rather than through their own awareness.

"Nowadays we have to include women, otherwise no work can be done. Besides, if women do not come to the meetings, each man has to tell the woman at home about what happened in the meetings."

Male Participant, India

Some women may never go beyond the initial safe space, it may provide what they personally need and they may have no interest in greater levels of participation. Others might get stuck at this step because of a number of barriers, discussed later in section 2.4. In India, most of the women have remained within the initial informal space because there are too many barriers preventing them from entering the other spaces, and the opportunities to participate in other spaces are limited; the only other spaces open to them in India were invited formal government spaces, operating at the inter-community level. In the other contexts, there were a number of different invited and organic spaces within the community that women could move into.

6 Where 'participant' is used to describe a speaker, it refers to a female participant in one of the three project countries. Where the speaker is male or a staff member of a partner organisation, this is clearly stated.

Entering other public decision-making spaces

Using the confidence they have acquired in the initial informal spaces, some women then move to actively participate within another space, including formal government created spaces. In Nicaragua and DRC, the experience of participating in a group generally leads to more participation in other spaces, with around 80% of those in the groups being involved in other spaces (with the exception of women in the literacy groups in DRC, where only 1-2 from each group move on to participate elsewhere). In DRC, due to the lack of formal spaces, the women go on to participate in other grassroots organisations, while in Nicaragua many move into local level government invited spaces. In India, only 20-30% of women from each community go on to participate in other spaces (i.e. those set up by government to canvass local opinions) and this participation is largely confined to physical attendance.

“When I started to attend meetings of the subcommittee DF, I became smart, I have no shame and I’m not afraid anymore. So, through this training, I became more courageous, and I started directing moms (women) and I became President of the gardeners.”

Participant, DRC

In Nicaragua the women participate in different invited and organic spaces in the community such as cooperatives, water committees and municipal assemblies. In India, the women go on to participate in the formal government spaces called the Pali Sabha and Gram Sabha.

A few women in every one of the communities have emerged as leaders, by being elected or selected to hold official positions within the various spaces. In India, around 10% of the research sample emerged as leaders. In DRC, reflecting the project strategy of working with already existing leaders, around 65% of the research group emerged as leaders. In Nicaragua, around 35% of women emerged as leaders. Through leadership, they gain greater confidence and experience of negotiating and debating their ideas with others. These women, while being the exception, have a greater sense of their ‘power within’, and a belief that they have the ‘power to’ take action; they go from challenging the gender norms that keep women in the home to speaking out and leading in public spaces, a huge change for many women.

“Power is a right that I have. Power is to decide, the power to decide, the power to lobby, the power to participate. It has a lot to do with participation, I think, because if I do not have the power, that is if I’m not empowered regarding my thoughts, what I want, if I’m undecided, I have no power or a sense of myself.”

Participant, Nicaragua

Women emerging as leaders are much more likely to have had experience in other invited or organic spaces before becoming involved in the Trócaire project, and had therefore

already developed some of the experience, knowledge and skills needed to enable entry into new spaces, with an expectation of being included and heard.

Lobbying authorities on basic needs

Some of the women have moved from participating within community spaces to actually lobbying the local government for improved access to services for their community. In Nicaragua and India, there are official government spaces to which citizens are invited so they can (at least in theory) influence community plans.

In India, as discussed above, only very small numbers of women are participating in these spaces. This is partly because the system set up by Trócaire’s partners to enable women to access decision makers resulted in the demands of the village being collectively presented in these spaces. Consequently, many women rely on their community representatives to attend and speak for them, rather than participating themselves. In contrast, in Nicaragua the approach used by the Governance partner developed the understanding and skills of all the women to enable them to participate in the formal spaces; consequently, most of the women in the research sample in two of the villages were actively involved in lobbying the government in these formal spaces. While some women have not actually spoken in these forums, they believe in the importance of collectively attending.

When the women in Nicaragua and India have not been successful in being heard or achieving a satisfactory response in these official invited spaces, groups of women have tried to tackle the unequal power relations between them and the state by directly targeting key local authorities that have the power to make decisions. In Nicaragua, this authority resided in the mayor, who presides over the Municipal Assembly; in India it is the Bloc Office. In the research sites examined in DRC, there are no official spaces for citizens to influence government plans, but through the creation of an invited space set up by Trócaire’s partner the women have been able to directly lobby the government.

For all the women who participated in these spaces, the act of doing so further strengthened their confidence when they found they were able to express themselves in front of officials or large groups. This marked a significant change from their initial shyness and reticence to speak out, and a real break with the position and norms expected of them within those communities.

“The other day, I could talk to the MLA. We have the courage now. If we hadn’t got this knowledge, our body would be shaking while talking to anybody. We are not educated, we haven’t learnt the printed letters, but we have got the knowledge.”

Participant, India

In each of the three countries, the issues that women have lobbied for publically have related directly to access to

services such as water (all countries), electricity (Nicaragua and DRC) and roads (India and Nicaragua). Women in each community have had some success with their advocacy. These successes have reinforced the women's confidence, knowledge, and belief in their power to influence decisions that directly affect their lives.

"There are things that we have not been able to achieve, but we have to have the conviction, the right to say, 'I can and I am going to do it.' Some advocacy we have managed to succeed... then the lobbying that I have fought for has been successful, I feel that I have gained power, I feel 'I can do it,' I achieved it; it is possible because I fought for this to be possible."

Participant, Nicaragua

These successful actions were always undertaken by the women collectively, and many noted their strength in numbers. This solidarity gave them greater confidence in turning individual power into collective power, which they found much harder for decision-makers to ignore.

"If we meet as a group of organised women, if it is a necessity of the group or better of all the region, it is more positive because unity brings the strength, and the more united we are, the more they hear us. What could I achieve alone with an institution, an NGO or mayor? Because they won't listen to one person; they would say 'what is this crazy woman doing?' If they received me and wrote down my idea, they would only put it in the bin."

Participant, Nicaragua

Women play different roles during the various lobbying processes that they get involved in. A few take on the role of leadership and instigate new advocacy actions, bringing women together with the decision-makers to request changes. Others join the process as participants, but do not take the initiative. Rather, they provide essential support to those who organise and speak out. This ensures that the community, and those they are lobbying, see that this is collective action born out of group discussions and joint selection of which issues to promote.

Mobilising other women

This evidence shows that collective action is essential in order to obtain a positive response from those in power; it is an integral part of the overall journey to achieving real change for women. Most of the women surveyed who have undertaken collective action have become aware that 'power with' others enables them to have greater leverage in negotiations, so that the greater the numbers of women participating, the bigger impact they can have. For most of these women, this means actively support initiatives when the leaders organise actions; for the leaders themselves, this involves personally mobilising other women within the community, not only to join them, but to start their own journeys of empowerment. This has proved very challenging; many women do not find it easy to challenge society's expectations of them and the gender norms that

shape their behaviour, and so do not easily respond to requests for change.

"The only thing that I could not have was this power to have more organized women. I wish there were more women organized. As I have the power to lobby, make changes; I wish there were more organized women that could have that power, which they still do not have, as they are not organized."

Participant, Nicaragua

In India and Nicaragua, very small numbers of women have started mobilising others, usually only the one or two women per community that have become leaders in the different spaces. In contrast, many more of the women in DRC were working to mobilise the support of other women. One of the project groups was specifically encouraged to raise awareness in the community about women's civic and political rights, through mobilising women in organic grassroots organisations as a core strategy. However, in all of the countries, the women have struggled to engage other women in the community, beyond those already involved in the invited spaces created by Trócaire's partner. Bringing other women on board to work collectively for change is challenging and time consuming, and involves many activities from awareness-raising through to encouraging active participation in a lobbying group. However, the very act of trying to mobilise other women marks real progress in the process of building a collective voice to influence (sometimes resistant) decision-makers.

The experiences confirm the iterative relationship between participation and empowerment; they are in a mutually reinforcing relationship. At each stage, the act of participation requires breaking with social norms and expectations, and leads to gains in the three transformative types of power ('power within', 'power to' and 'power with') through building confidence and awareness, the experience of joint working and decision-making, and the taking of actions. The knowledge and skills gained often lead to further participation. As women build their experience and belief in what they can do, taking more control over decisions that affect their lives, they can become more empowered. This empowerment can also lead to more engagement and participation. This is a process that works well for some while others stall along the way.

Once women start this journey, they are not necessarily continuously compelled onwards and progress is not linear; there remain many barriers blocking their paths. For example, by gaining more power, some women have started to challenge the dominant social norms that limit their opportunities and voice. This can cause conflict, which leads to a backlash that can push the women backwards, sometimes all the way back into the home.

2.3.2 Case studies of individual women's journeys

These steps present a schematic of the possible different stages in women's journeys of participation and empowerment. However, these journeys are best understood through the lived experiences of the women. Given the very different contexts, the individual experiences of women are very diverse; in order to demonstrate these complexities, a number of journeys are presented. The following section uses three case studies, one from each of the case study countries, to highlight the barriers and enablers that characterise their journeys. Each journey is unique, but as it is not possible to present all of the women's experiences here, the case studies selected represent different types of experiences.



Figure 5: Relationship between participation and empowerment

Case study 1

Césarine, Kinza Mvute, DRC

Césarine is 55 and lives in Kinza Mvute. She has two adult children who no longer live with her, and she looks after her brother's son and daughter. She is the most active research participant from DRC, and is an active member or leader of six organic organisations and two invited spaces.

Césarine reports always having had a desire to participate, even when she was at school. Before becoming involved in Trócaire's programme Césarine was already the leader of a grassroots association where she was thrust into leadership at the suggestion of others, but lacked the confidence to actively lead. Through her participation within the invited spaces set up by Trócaire's partner she gained the confidence to actively participate within this role.

"The biggest thing that I had to improve in myself was being able to speak in public. I was fearful of speaking in front of... mainly men who had a higher intellectual level than me: why? I felt a complex about my inferior education as a woman. This improved as I took on responsibilities in different grassroots organisations and especially because of the training by CDJP Matadi on civil and political rights of women, and women's leadership etc."

Césarine's new confidence allowed her to openly contest leadership roles. In one organisation she successfully defeated a number of her male colleagues for the post of vice-president. Her election was not accepted by all

the members but Césarine was able to overcome this resistance through using her knowledge on rights.

"During my first meeting on planning, the men commented that I was the only woman amongst all of the administrators. When I'd speak, I'd notice that the men weren't entirely convinced. They even had a song that they'd sing about me to show how they felt, but I stood up to them by quoting articles from the Constitution. I'd say to them 'Refer to article 14, which says that there should be no discrimination. I have the right to equal representation. We have the right to equal representation in every institution. Article 23: Women's right to expression. 'After I said that, there was silence."

Césarine feels empowered to also question decisions within her extended family. Her new confidence has been critiqued by a number of male family members but she has continued to participate and there is now a level of acceptance of her participation.

"Now when they speak, if I am not satisfied I tell them, 'No, it's not like that, it's more like this.' Then the cousins began to say, 'And you, as you have become chatty! How did you become so talkative? You were not chatty before!' And I said 'Yes I became talkative! because before you didn't take us seriously! Now we have opened our eyes. Our eyes are open now, you will no longer dominate us...' Because people are not used to seeing women speak up in front of men, they thought that I had become rude. Some said, 'You are too high-mighty, how is it you compete with men like that!' So in our families, some people began to think it was negative. But when they saw what I started to do, sometimes they noticed that

I added some wisdom they themselves did not have before. Because of this, they began to understand."

As part of citizens' committee, Césarine has been involved in lobbying the authorities on a number of issues, including the water and electricity supply in the community. Césarine is now confident to talk to those in authority and is no longer afraid.

"They asked me to come because the Minister and

Mfuka Lonzola were coming to deal with the insecurity in our area. I was told that ten women were needed there. I said that we needed to go, to show that we women of Kinzau-Mvuete are competent. I was afraid, but I had to go and get involved. When we got there, I was aware of their level of education. When I took the floor, I created the sense that I was a powerful woman from Kinzau-Mvuete. I spoke in front of the Minister, saying that the situation was not good enough."



Maman Cesarine – Kinzau Mvuete,
DRC. Photo: Eoghan Rice

Case Study 2

Hilda⁷, La Bahiona, Nicaragua

Hilda is 21 years old and lives in the community of La Bahiona, with her 6 year old daughter and partner. She is a leader in a number of invited spaces within the community.

Hilda has always been interested in participating within different initiatives, so when Trócaire's partners started working in the community she was the first person to join, and she motivated other women to be involved. As one of her roles within the different spaces, Hilda has been involved in advocating for many different community issues.

"One time, I was involved in giving a letter to the centre there in Piero Holgun in San Luis, so that they would come and undertake a water sample because it was coming out contaminated. I went with others from the Council to petition them. We have also lobbied them for electricity. We also lobbied the mayor; we wrote a request for them to come and close a hole that was there, and they helped us to close it."

Despite these successes, Hilda reports three main barriers that impede her participation: access to childcare; criticism from community members; and resistance from her husband. Many people in the community believe that a woman should not be involved in community decisions, and that their role is to look after the household. A woman that is participating outside the home is regarded by many as at best lazy (for neglecting her domestic work), or at worst promiscuous (with her participation being a guise to find other men). Hilda recalls that, when she was first elected to a role within one of the community spaces, it caused controversy in the community.

"I remember when they elected me to the Council, they said, 'a women doesn't know about these things.' He said I had to ask permission from my husband; 'you need to take into account that you have a husband who is in charge, and if he wants you to join the Council, you can do it, and if not, you can't'. I said to him 'I don't have to ask permission from anybody'. This annoyed him, and he fought with the other man."

Since this time, Hilda has continued to face criticism from some men and women within the community, and many have questioned her motivation. These critiques have not stopped Hilda from participating, and through

her experiences she has gained in confidence and now she believes that she has as much right to participate as men.

"In the beginning, I heard many versions of the critiques. However, now I am calmer because I see what they say is not true, so I don't even hear what they say."

At home, Hilda also faces resistance. Her husband has always struggled to accept her participation, and at first he flatly refused to let her attend. Over time, he has given her permission on the condition that she does not neglect her domestic responsibilities. Therefore, Hilda must find childcare for their daughter whenever there is a meeting, which in itself can be a real barrier.

"I have to find someone who can look after her. Sometimes, when I can, I take her with me, but it is boring and she doesn't like it. This is something that sometimes makes me tired of attending meetings."

Recently her participation has caused renewed issues within her relationship with her husband. He is increasingly exercising violence in the form of emotional and financial control to stop her from participating.

"Once he told me to decide whether I want to be with him or be in my meetings, in spaces in which I participate; 'Choose any of these things, if you stay with me or you stay in those spaces where you participate', but I didn't say anything... [He] is working and I am here; I have no money, I have to rely on him to give me money to go to meetings, and he won't give me money for this. When I don't have it, I can't go."

Hilda admits to harbouring dreams of running away from the situation, but does not want to abandon all the work that she has fought for through her participation.

"Sometimes I have a desire to leave and go far away, but then I start to think about the pig project and my repayment; if I leave, it will look bad on me. I think about a lot of things, like the cooperative; I would lose all of it, all they are helping us with. When the time comes, I don't know what I will do."

Case study 3

Panmati Khilo, Khatapada, India

Panmati Khilo is 55. She has 6 children aged 4-18, and she has been a member of a Trócaire-supported community group for 5 years. Panmati only started participating when she joined the invited spaces set up by Trócaire's partners.

Panmati is able to attend village meetings without asking her husband's permission. She attends a women's savings-and-loan group (SHG) regularly, but only attends community meetings once or twice a year. Panmati has not become a leader in any of the community spaces, but she does feel that her confidence has improved as a result of the things that she has learned whilst in the invited spaces.

"Now we have no fear. Now we have learned many things from the sirs/didsi [Partner staff]. Now women have come forward. Even if a big officer comes, we have no fear now. Earlier, we didn't know anything."

"When sirs/didis came to us, they gave us knowledge."

Panmati does not engage in advocacy, because she does not go to meetings outside the village; she sees this as the responsibility of the leaders of the group, and feels that as a member she does not need to concern herself with such things.

"I attend only village meetings. Our SHG group meetings are held in the village. I am only a member. If one is a president or secretary, then one has to go to meetings in Baipariguda and other places."

If she did want attend to a meeting outside the village, she would have to ask her husband for permission, which could be problematic.

"I attend all meetings of the village without asking him. Outside meetings, I have to ask him. He generally says yes, but sometimes if he is not in a good mood he says no."



Panmati Khilo- Khatapada, India
Photo: BKS

These three case studies provide examples of different journeys and illustrate how different experiences alter this journey. Each of the case studies presents a specific type of experience:

- Césarine's case study exemplifies the journey for those women who have emerged as leaders. These women feel most able to use their power to influence decisions that affect their lives. They have often started to challenge their subordination within their families, and they use their voice to represent the collective concerns of others. A number of factors are likely to support women who emerge as leaders, including: the length of time spent participating; support from family members; and connections to existing leaders. There is no set formula to identify who will emerge as a leader and literacy or education were not always prerequisites.
- Hilda's case study illustrates the journey as experienced by many women. Like her, these women support the development of a collective voice in the spaces and provide the leaders with necessary backing. These women could later emerge as leaders, but some may have no interest or are constrained by difficult barriers (for example, as Hilda is by her husband). Hilda is very young, but her age did not emerge as a barrier in Nicaragua. However, in DRC all of the women leaders were above 40, and in India women with young children were absent actively participating in the different invited spaces, suggesting that age is a barrier in many contexts.
- The story of Panamati demonstrates the journey for women who have joined the initial safe space, and have started to feel able to speak and participate in group decisions, but lack the ambition/confidence/time or interest to participate in other spaces or collective actions. They may also face a range of personal and community barriers to extending their involvement, which they feel unable to overcome.

These differences are important to highlight, because different strategies are needed to support women at the various stages in their journey. Even if women do gain confidence, knowledge and self-esteem, this does not necessarily mean they will want to play an active role in transforming the wider world around them. Women will play different roles within groups, and while it is very important to eradicate the barriers that prevent women advancing, it is also essential to respect the women's own desires and motivations. It is also important in supporting women to challenge their position and status, as well as to promote social change, to recognise and respond to the risks that this can pose to some women. Their attendance, speaking out, lobbying in public or within their own homes, can result in increased risks of violence or conflict with their families and communities. Many women spoke about the price they had to pay for stepping beyond the existing social norms;

those working with them need to be aware of, and work to mitigate, the risks they are taking in participating and travelling this empowerment pathway.

2.4 Barriers and enablers to the journeys

Women's journeys are hindered by barriers that stem from the unequal power relations that cause disempowerment, rooted in the existing power differences between men and women, as well as citizens and the state. The women identified a number of barriers and enablers that hindered or supported them in their individual journeys. These barriers impede women's likelihood of being able to participate, and their ability to perform whilst participating.

The nature of the spaces in which women participate also affects their participation, and the likelihood of their participation supporting their empowerment by limiting or supporting their ability to influence decisions. These barriers were not specifically identified by the women, but came from an analysis of their experiences in the different spaces.

2.4.1 Barriers that women perceive hinder their journeys

This section looks at the barriers which emerged from women's description of their experiences. All of the women face barriers in their empowerment journeys because of unequal power relations between men and women. Prevailing gender norms undermine women's power to a greater or lesser degree, by delegitimising their voices and right to participate. For every woman, the barriers vary and are very dependent on their individual circumstances. The way they impact on women's ability to participate and address their relative lack of power varies also.

Legitimacy to be in the public space

In each of the contexts, because of prevailing patriarchal systems, women are not traditionally part of public decision-making. Women did not hold positions of authority, and were not even invited to or included in community discussions. Even where women are traditionally involved in community spaces, as they are in DRC, women do not hold positions of authority. In both Nicaragua and India, it was a taboo for women to attend community meetings until the Trócaire-supported programme started; they would face ridicule if they dared to break this taboo. In India this was true despite local level quota legislation, which has been in place for nearly two decades. Assigned gender roles and concepts of what it means to be a good wife or woman bind women tightly to the social norms, and can be hard to challenge; this work can take a lot of time and support.

There have been shifts to the social norms for women in every country, but change is slow and there is still clear

resistance from some men and women. In every research site, women were openly critiqued for trying to participate, and intimidated with name-calling.

- Critiques were most frequently reported in Nicaragua. Women who participated in public life were scorned, by men and women, for being lazy and even promiscuous and derided for not remaining in their private houses. All of the research groups reported these critiques, but the women who left the community to engage in advocacy faced the most criticism.
- In India, women entered community meetings at Trócaire's partners' insistence on their inclusion, claiming that women are needed if the men want to access government benefits. Over time, the men came to see that the women could contribute, and women have come to feel that they should be in meetings, but some criticism persists.

"In the VDC meeting, men suppress women by saying, 'You keep quiet, you women don't know anything'. After this, one would forget to say anything and even leave the place without saying a word"

Participant, India

- In DRC, women did not face resistance to their participation in general (partly because women are expected to be active in the public domain through work and trade), but when they were running for or selected to be leaders in mixed grassroots organisations, they faced derision. Gender norms are so entrenched that there are even common sayings and songs used to demonstrate women's role is not to lead.

"There are many men... many say 'Oh! Tika Makambu wana (drop these ideas), Mwasi AKOTIKALA KAKA Mwasi (A woman will remain a woman)'"

Participant, DRC

Male control over women's mobility

Within the rural contexts in India and Nicaragua, men held almost complete control over women's mobility. To be able to leave the house to engage in non-domestic tasks, the women must seek permission from their partners, even if the activity is in the local village. Men have to accept the legitimacy of women's participation for women to be allowed to participate. In both contexts, many women have managed to participate by gaining their husbands permission. However, in each site, permission is mutable and may be removed at any point. In Nicaragua, some women have just decided to ignore the norms and participate even if they were specifically denied permission by their husbands.

Within the urban context of DRC, the women have much greater control over their mobility, but a number of women still reported tensions between their husbands due to their participation.

"He'd like me to leave some of the things. That creates tension at home. What I would like to change is his way of pressing me to drop some of my activities. I'd like him to stop."

Participant, DRC

Where women are allowed to participate, they are expected to show results from their participation, i.e. their participation must bring benefits to their families. This expectation is often explicit and a number of the women in each context report increased tensions between them and their partner because their participation has not led to anything concrete.

"In the last one year or so my husband is scolding me saying, 'you have been going to meetings for all these years. What have you got? Not even a house?' So I have stopped going to meetings now. Earlier I used to go to every meeting."

Participant, India

Even if permission is granted, some men have used economic coercion to render that permission void. This barrier is so powerful that it can affect women at every turn; in each research country there is at least one example of a leader who has had to withdraw or limit her participation because of resistance from her husband.

Unequal division of labour

In every context, social norms dictate that it is the responsibility of women to undertake all the domestic duties within the household. The internalisation of power relations means that women are seen as caregivers and they largely accept it is part of their duty as women to undertake all domestic tasks. While they start to challenge some existing norms by participating in the public space, they nevertheless continue to shoulder the burden of care within the home.

"We are doing the housework now also. But men have understood now. They have understood that women would prepare food for them after coming from the meeting."

Participant, India

Adding new roles and responsibilities does not change the existing gender roles in any significant way, and women have to juggle their external activities with fulfilling their multiple roles as carers, cooks, cleaners, water and firewood collectors. Even in Nicaragua, where the projects have actively tried to address the issue of the domestic division of labour, and where there have been some shifts, most women's days are dominated by their heavy domestic workload.

"Sometimes I feel tired. Sometimes I wish I could have a day to sit and relax with nothing to do, to be calm. A day to do absolutely nothing because there are times where I don't have time for anything. He helps me to a certain point, but it is not that he is going to make the main effort."

Participant, Nicaragua

Domestic social norms are so ingrained that, in both India and DRC, the women were unable to contemplate a situation where they were not entirely responsible for all the domestic and reproductive tasks.

“One has to do everything. You cannot change any work. For women, all these tasks are important and one has to do it.”
Participant, India

Across the contexts, all of the women reported using various strategies (such as getting up even earlier every day) to ensure they could participate in the various spaces and still fulfil their domestic duties.

Unpaid care work

The burden of unpaid care work also limits women's opportunity to participate and become leaders. In both India and Nicaragua, the issue of childcare as an ongoing barrier emerged. In Nicaragua, the women reported not attending a meeting because they could not find childcare arrangements, leaving their children alone, or attending meetings with young children (which inevitably impedes their participation). In India, women with very young children were almost entirely absent from any decision-making space, because of their care commitments.

“We have small children and that is also a problem. Who is going to look after your small children, even if one wants to leave them with somebody in the village? So we won't go.”
Participant, India

In DRC, the majority of women were older and no longer had young children to care for, so this issue did not typically arise. Childcare was not mentioned as a specific barrier by many women, but this could be because of the age bias in the sample; women with children were absent from the majority of the groups selected.

Internalisation of those norms leading to low self-confidence

Social norms are so rigidly entrenched that before the women in the research started participating, they accepted as truth that only men should hold leadership posts and make community decisions. They were unable to question the status-quo, because it did not enter their consciousness that it was problematic; it was perceived as normal and therefore became immutable.

“Most women in this community recognize only a man's work, only men are the ones to walk in the street, only men should be involved in lobbying, that this is the work of a man, not a woman.”
Participant, Nicaragua

This inequality, even if poorly understood by the women, manifested itself in the low self-confidence and low self-esteem which all the women reported as an issue. Low self-confidence resulted from the internalisation of women's inferiority and a belief that women are not supposed to be vocal in public spaces. It manifests itself in fears to speak in

public and take on leadership roles. Low self-esteem was also expressed by women as a lack of knowledge and general feelings of incompetency.

“We women in general have an inferiority complex. In general, we are inferior, and that is the inferiority complex. We women have to suffer that.”
Participant, DRC

Because these feelings stem from the unequal power relations, they do not only affect women at the start of the empowerment journey, but constantly impede their progress.

Although the women in the research (and some men) have accepted women's right to participate and even lead, there are many norms that remain unchallenged, such as the division of labour and the need for permission to visit family members. In Nicaragua and India, even if the women are actively participating, they must seek permission to visit their friends or relatives. In Nicaragua, many of the women have resisted their husband's attempts to control their mobility, while others perceive it as unequal but have not been able to overcome it (whereas none of the women in India perceived this control as unjust or unequal).

“If there is work at home and he says no, then one has to understand the situation and not insist on going... Besides, where I would have to go alone and other women are not going, he would ask me not to attend.”
Participant, India

All of these barriers are underpinned by the division of gender roles within the societies, and the laws, beliefs and practices that uphold them. They interact with each other to create the boundaries which shape women's lives and their participation. There is a common belief that a women's place is to look after the home and therefore she must do all of the domestic work and care for the children; this belief dictates that her role is not to make decisions about the community, and if she is going to participate in meetings then she must do so as well as fulfilling her domestic and reproductive duties. Until these norms change, women's empowerment journeys will always be damaged or impeded with the same barriers.

2.4.2 Enablers that women perceive support their journeys

A number of general enablers emerged that directly address the barriers, and support women to overcome them by tackling both the internalisation of norms, as well as the effects of the norms.

Knowledge of rights

Training on rights is a fundamental part of all of the projects observed in this research, and one of the two main strategies used by Trócaire in supporting women's participation. In DRC and Nicaragua, learning about women's political and civil

rights supported the participants to question the status-quo of male dominance: They knew that they as women had the right to participate in public life, because it was written in law, empowering them with a legal backing to start challenging male dominance in public spaces.

In DRC, the training was approached from a governance perspective, with an emphasis on the rights laid out in the constitution, topics relating to governance structures, and advocacy techniques. The citizens' groups received initial training on these topics when they were established in 2009, and they then attended two days of training over the course of the year. For the women members of these spaces, there were two constitutional rights that particularly resonated and were repeatedly cited as the impetus of their newfound confidence to express themselves publicly: The rights to expression, and women's right to equality.

"Thus, men and woman are equal because we are governed by the same Constitution and the same laws."

Participant, DRC

Feeling that they were equal citizens, with the same rights as men, allowed some of the women to break the cultural taboo of speaking in front of men and starting to lead mixed spaces. However, women that were part of the literacy centre in DRC (also set up by Trócaire's partner) also received training about political and civil rights but many found the training had not supported them to challenge the cultural prohibitions on participation and leadership.

In Nicaragua, the women were less likely to name specific

rights that had supported their empowerment journeys, referring much more generally to knowing their rights as women. The training was much more frequent in Nicaragua, where the partners accompanied the women in meetings every two weeks. In the gender programme, the women received support from psychologists, social workers and lawyers, dramatically increasing their interaction with the partner organisations. The training in the gender programme was more broadly focused on women's rights as a universal concept, explored against a background of violence and oppression. In the governance programme, although specific national legislation regarding civil and political rights were covered, issues such as violence and relations within the home were also part of training. Knowledge of their rights has given many women the confidence to speak in public meetings:

"I have changed the way that I speak and think a lot, because thankfully now that I have knowledge about my rights, I can speak without fear. This is because I know my rights and no one can rob them from me."

Participant, Nicaragua

Living free from violence was an issue that resonated with many of the women in the Nicaragua programme; the only law that was repeatedly mentioned by all of the communities was the violence against women law passed in 2012. The women in Nicaragua reported positive changes in their familial relationships as a result of the knowledge and skills they learnt through their involvement in Trócaire projects, which was not the case in the other two contexts. One of the significant enablers for women was learning that they did not have to accept being controlled by their husbands in the home; this knowledge strengthened the women's self-esteem and many were then able to question their husband's dominance in the home and further negotiate their ability to participate in different community spaces.

"I love it when we discuss, debate and talk about our rights as women. This is how we have learnt our rights as women. It is better now for women; if we see that our partner is treating us badly, we have the right to leave them, because our life has value. We don't have to continue living a life of abuse, we don't have to continue being victims to our husbands, our neighbours, or anyone anymore, because we are women and we have value...I tell my sons that all the rights that they have, equally their wives have the same rights, to take decisions, as they are not the rulers of their wives."

Participant, Nicaragua

In India, training on women's rights was not cited by the women as an enabler; the formal training about rights was mainly given to the president of the invited spaces and sometimes the secretaries, so most people did not directly attend trainings. While the partners did facilitate discussions during meetings with larger numbers of people about the right to participate and the different entitlements that people could access from the local government, the women did not attribute this knowledge to helping them address the taboo



"I took them because the truth is that this is how I feel in the Organised Women's group, joyous." Photo taken by Maria Auxiliadora Miranda Varela, Tololar 2, Nicaragua as part of the photovoice activity.

of participating in public spaces. However, the women were adamant that they had gained significant knowledge from participating in the spaces created by Trócaire's partners and this had increased their confidence, though they rarely referred to specific knowledge that had helped with this.

"Now after attending several meetings and interacting with people like you, we understand many things. People like you are teaching us so many things. The president and the secretary also tell us many things which they learn from attending meetings. So now we understand."

Participant, India

The only specific rights the women in India mentioned were the right to access schemes such as pensions or work. Their knowledge about these schemes meant they could materially improve their lives by participating in the spaces established by Trócaire partners. It is unclear, however, whether these material benefits supported their empowerment journeys.

"People didn't know about the benefits. They didn't understand about the Palli Sabha... We had a bad road, now we have a good one. People who didn't have houses [have] now got houses. We have got electricity. We have got drinking water. We have got a little of everything. Whatever we had given in the Palli Sabha, we have got it... Now we got the right to go to the Block and even to the collector. We have learnt all this only recently."

Participant, India

Training alone is not a solution to women's empowerment; attendance at a course on women's civic and political rights does not automatically trigger the challenging of patriarchal norms. However, training is clearly part of a wider process of discussion, sharing and reflection, and can bring valuable new knowledge that women find empowering. When this broader process is lacking, the training has not proved to be an enabler to increase women's power and support their participation. This was evidenced in the research sites in India and in the literacy centres in DRC, where women remained in their initial groups, and did not actively promote social changes for women⁸.

Women-only spaces

Another key strategy used across Trócaire's programmes is organising. In each of the research countries, Trócaire's partners have created new women-only spaces to support women's participation. The act of collectively organising meant that the women have had the chance to meet and discuss issues affecting their lives. These spaces provided women in every country with a 'safe space' to build their confidence without facing judgement from men.

"When there are only women, you are always going forward. There are many men...many say 'A woman will remain a

woman.' So because of such people, as the association is female-led, we would like it to continue as such."

Participant, DRC

In Nicaragua, the women were able to share their experiences of violence, domination and control within their households and support each other in addressing these issues.

"Because we didn't leave our village, we had decided that our problems only applied to us here, but this is not the case. Now I know women from other communities, I know their stories and they mine. This has been a success because, through APADEIM, we have all got to know each other, and when a woman we knew was raped in Jiquilillo we got in the truck and went there. This meant a lot to me, because that day she was not alone as we were all there with her."

Participant, Nicaragua

By exploring these issues within a group environment, the women went from conceiving the violence in their lives as an individual issue between themselves and their husbands, to understanding it as a collective issue that was rooted in their gender identities.

In DRC, the alliances made between the women of the groups allowed them to turn to each other for support when trying to counter male resistance to their participation, or address problems they were facing in their private lives.

"I am president of a CLD. Initially, in all CLD, presidents were only men. The president had resigned, I was then unanimously appointed to take over for the ensuing term. It was hard at first, not everyone agreed with the decision. However, I am always encouraged by our secretary, mama Césarine, who always tells me 'my sister, stand firm!'"

Participant, DRC

In India, the women had never had a space to meet as women. For most, being able to speak in meetings in front of men was a terrifying prospect. The women only self-help groups did provide the women with the opportunity to discuss issues and build confidence to speak in a safe environment before they entered the larger community committee meetings. The women have been able to raise issues that affect them in their home lives, and have been able to rely on the other women in the group to support them in addressing these. For example, the women collectively mobilised to ban the production and consumption of alcohol in their villages, after the issue was introduced by Trócaire's partners.

Woman (W): *"We women of five SHGs sat together at this place and discussed it."*

Facilitator (F): *"Yes, women of five groups decided. But whose idea was it initially?"*

8 Women tend to reflect back on the rights that they have been taught, with a clear bias in governance programmes towards civic and political rights and in the gender programmes to issues of violence and to challenge the domestic division of labour. There is a need to explore further what is contained in rights training and to ensure that a more holistic approach is taken to informing women about their civic, political, cultural, financial, and social rights.

- W** "There is one Yasoda from one group. There was always problem in her family as her husband used to drink a lot."
- F** "Then how did you proceed?"
- W** "She raised the issue in her group and they contacted us and we decided that all groups should join in this."
- F** "Did you discuss it in your group? Did everybody agree to take up this issue?"
- W** "Yes."
- F** "Why did you agree to this as it was a problem in another group?"
- W** "Alcohol is a problem for the entire village."
- F** "So you agreed to join?"
- W** "Yes."

Participants, India

The learning and experiences within these 'safe spaces' have supported women's empowerment journeys by providing them with collective strength, through allowing them to meet, talk, and support each other to address the barriers impeding their participation.

Self confidence

An increase in self-confidence was the most reported change that women said they had experienced as a result of their participation within the partner-created spaces, and was the most important enabler for progression along the journey. The majority of women attributed the changes in their increased knowledge and experience to participating. The women described the change in self-confidence as enabling them to express themselves without fear.

"With low self-esteem, one doesn't have the security to say things; you think that everything you say, everything that you are going to say, is unnecessary and invalid. This was the elemental change for me. With greater self-esteem, I now have the confidence and the security to say things without fear, to say things firmly."

Participant, Nicaragua

Self-confidence not only supported women to negotiate with their husbands and families for a greater say in decisions, but for many women it also meant they were able to ignore the critiques that other community members levelled at them. By participating, the women are breaking the social taboos; therefore they need this confidence to continue in the face of criticisms.

"Another thing that has changed is that now I do not care much if people do not like me being involved in advocacy. If I feel that I am contributing to something that will contribute to the community, I will continue to do so if people do not like it."

Participant, Nicaragua

Independent incomes

In both DRC and Nicaragua, it is common for men to control the family assets; women are therefore reliant on men for economic means. Consequently, transportation costs become an issue when women have to participate outside of the community.

"As I have said before, I lived on my husband's wallet. Depending on what he wanted to do and if he wanted to give it, as long as he had plenty of booze. I will not be millionaire, but I have the means to have a better life."

Participant, Nicaragua

If women have no independent income, they rely on their husbands' willingness to support their participation financially. In Nicaragua and DRC, independent incomes have enabled some women to pay their own participation costs, or allowed them to take family decisions such as paying education fees. However, an independent income is not guaranteed to support empowerment; men can feel threatened by women that have their own source of income, and this can lead to increased violence, as was the case in one of the communities within Nicaragua. The women-led cooperative in La Bahiona secured a tourism project for income generation, which caused intense friction in the community. This not only negatively impacted on women's relationships with their partners, but caused friction between the women of the group, eroding the solidarity between the women.

"There are women, including some that are in the cooperative that have been influenced by him [the community leader] and his misinformation, and when he comes they start to fight with me."

Participant, Nicaragua

Where women have control over their income, this has to also be accepted by the community if it is to be an enabler for their participation and empowerment.

Supportive families

Having a husband and family that will encourage women to participate is also a clear enabler: The issue of permission and the tensions caused by some of the women's participation demonstrates the importance of a supportive partner.

"Before, only he made the decisions; if he told me this is going to happen, that is what was done. Not today, as a result of us both being involved in this programme, he has realised that I as a woman [have] the same rights as him"

Participant, Nicaragua.

Domestic and care responsibilities can be a heavy burden that limit women's participation; a partner or family-member that is able to support women with this is a strong asset and encouragement to the woman. This is especially important for those involved in lobbying local authorities, because their advocacy campaigns can take them away from the community and their domestic duties. Having a partner who is supportive and willing to undertake childcare or domestic work enables the women to undertake advocacy work more easily. However, this is rare and only one or two women in each context reported having a partner who would help with domestic tasks; these women were generally the leaders, but not always. Even if a husband does not share the burden of domestic work, their acceptance (and even in some cases encouragement) of a



women's participation is a big enabler. Almost all of the leaders had supportive husbands and families.

2.4.3 Barriers that are not being addressed in current programming

For the enabling factors to lead to sustainable change, they must address the barriers described above. The enablers that have been promoted by Trócaire's partners have tended to support women by addressing the symptoms rather than the root cause of these barriers. For example, women in each of the countries are still facing resistance to their participation from family and community members, and none of the projects have yet systematically worked to address the wider social norms that perpetuate this resistance. Only the communities within the gender programme in Nicaragua have tried to work with women's partners and community leaders on unequal attitudes and behaviours that limit women's participation. Violence is another issue that was clear in every context (although expressed in different forms⁹), but again only in Nicaragua and mainly in the gender programme was this issue addressed. Without tackling the issue of unequal power and its oppressive influence over men and women's behaviour, these barriers will continue to challenge and undermine women's journeys.

2.4.4 Characteristics of the spaces that affect participation

Within each space, there were different characteristics that affect women's engagement and activity within the space. These characteristics interacted with the barriers identified above to shape the boundaries of possible action for the actor's within the space. Across the different contexts, a number of characteristics emerged which were more likely to promote the possibilities for women's participation to support a process of empowerment. These were:

- Egalitarian
- Frequent
- Autonomy over decisions

Hierarchical versus flat structure

All of the spaces were designed to be run by an executive committee; within some of the government spaces, this committee is the elected local council of the area. Those with the most hierarchical structures, where power is concentrated in the hands of the Presidents (in the case of community spaces) or official representatives (in state spaces), have been

more restrictive for women than spaces with more egalitarian structures.

The research in India found the most extreme example of hierarchy affecting women's participation: In the citizens' committee set up by Trócaire's partners the president holds the most power and is largely unquestioned by the other members:

F *"Has there been any occasion when the president proposed something and you disagreed?"*

W *"No. The president won't propose anything which others wouldn't agree. We all agree to what the president says."*

Participants, India

Their power has been further entrenched because only the president received training on governance and advocacy, leaving him as the sole authority in the group. All of the presidents in the research communities were male, reinforcing the status-quo of men as decision-makers and limiting the spaces for women to contribute or emerge as leaders.

In DRC, the majority of organic and invited spaces are also very hierarchical; members that are not part of the executive committee do not generally contribute to decisions.

F *"Who is most involved in the decision-making?"*

W *"In CLGP, it's the President. When she makes a decision, she calls in the committee, that is, the two Vice Presidents, the Secretary, and the Treasurer, and they set a day for going to see the authorities. When she makes the decision, she gathers together the committee and a decision is made. In the Legion of Mary, the President, along with the committee, makes the decisions. In the parish committee, when decisions are made, we bring them to the parish priest, who has the final say."*

Participant, DRC

Many of the women have now become leaders in these spaces, but they have emulated this structure. The hierarchical nature means that there is little opportunity for other women to emerge and the development of skills and experience is limited to only a small number of women, who are often leaders in three or four different spaces.

In contrast, in Nicaragua, although the organised women's group was a space created by Trócaire's partners and is run by an executive committee, the whole group is actively involved in taking decisions about the action they are going to undertake. All the women, not just one or two representatives, received the training and built up their skills and confidence. Consequently in their case, it is the group and not an individual

that decides.

"Maintaining the unity of being organised, because only by doing this will we achieve what we propose, through organisation and unity."

Participant, Nicaragua

The partner organisation has specifically encouraged a number of women within the group to take the lead on different initiatives. For example, the women in the community of Tololar 2 elected a 'social control committee' to monitor the implementation of a government project to repair the road in their community. The women in charge of this committee were not the women on the executive committee of the organised women's group. The more egalitarian structure provided greater prospects for women to get involved, learn, express their needs and contribute to decisions.

Infrequent versus regular

The frequency of meetings held as part of each of the spaces also affects the opportunity for participation to deliver transformation of power relations. In India and Nicaragua, the official spaces for citizens to influence government planning decisions operate only twice yearly. These meetings are for large numbers of communities and can attract hundreds of people. They are so infrequent that the physical opportunities for participation are drastically limited. This is particularly problematic for women, because of the gendered barriers mentioned above; for example, if meetings occur rarely, women may not be able to secure reliable childcare. Meanwhile, speaking in a very large group is far more challenging than speaking in a smaller space.

All the partner created spaces meet very regularly, either monthly or every two weeks, over the period of a five year programme. This is a significant amount of time, and the opportunities to learn and grow within that time are therefore much greater. Repeatedly the women cited the partner-spaces as the places where they had learned knowledge, confidence and skills that could then be utilised in other spaces. In Nicaragua, the invited spaces created by Trócaire's partners meet every two weeks; this regularity has supported ongoing training, reflection and bonds of solidarity, although it inevitably reduces the scale of the programme.

Tokenistic versus meaningful control over decisions

Invited spaces are created by external agents who decide on the rules of the space, and some of the spaces are composed in a manner that limits the opportunity for participation to lead to meaningful influence over decisions. This is especially true in invited spaces created by governments, where decisions are externally controlled and can serve to legitimize policy agendas from somewhere else and offer minimal opportunity for the women's participation to influence decisions. In these instances, the decision-maker's hands are already tied.

9 Violence against women is understood to include physical, sexual and psychological violence as well as the effects of coercion and control exercised by men over women.



Women at a Gram Sabha in Koraput India Photo: BKS

In DRC, despite the fact that women have lobbied the authorities, there are no official citizen spaces and all the power effectively lies in the local authorities' hands. The women have no power over the budget or influence over community plans.

"We are on good terms [with the authorities]. For example, today we spoke for a good while. But we still have some difficulties, because now for example, with regards to budget control, we had requested an invitation for us to meet them, but until now they cannot fix anything."

Participant, DRC

In Nicaragua and India, the women report being dissatisfied with the official spaces for influencing government planning because their requests are not always granted.

W *We gave an application for a road and a tube-well in the village. We gave it to the Sarpanch.*

F *What did they say?*

W *He said yes, but then he suppressed it.*

F *Did you get what you had applied for?*

W *No.*

Participant, India

In both countries, the citizens' needs are meant to influence the local governments' plans for the year, and resources should be allocated based on the different demands. However, in reality the citizens present their demands, and the authorities then decide what to prioritise. In Los Mangles in Nicaragua, the women recall that even though they requested agricultural inputs, the budget was spent on a roofing scheme, which the

majority of the community had already benefited from.

"Here we depend on cultivation. You know that the first harvest failed, there are a lot of people waiting for seed; waiting for someone to provide us with a loan to sow... But when the mayor came, he shut us down and said that the government have given strict orders not to support agricultural production...they are going to spend the 172,000 cordobas on Plan Techo (a zinc roofing scheme), yet here only 10 families that have not received it already!"

Participant, Nicaragua

In Nicaragua, the Council of Family, local management structures created by the government, are an example of an externally controlled space. These structures play a key role in the distribution of poverty-reduction schemes. Decisions about beneficiary selection are meant to be taken by the community and confirmed by the executive committee, but (in the communities studied) decisions are often taken by government officials. Women's participation within the space thus ultimately has no effect on the outcome of the decision, which leads to frustration. This demonstrates the limited role that community level participation can have in the absence of accountable state structures.

"What is the point of forming this committee if we do not function? Just for signing things, 'Look, you have to sign this paper', not for anything else."

Participant: *"They Just to ask us to sign."*

Participant: *"They just formed it and then nothing else."*

Participants, Nicaragua

However, NGO-created invited spaces can be equally as problematic. In India, Trócaire's partners tried to encourage women's participation in the citizens' committee by telling men that, due to government policy, they need women to obtain entitlements. As a result of this, women repeatedly refer to being instructed by the men to undertake advocacy, rather than deciding themselves that they wanted to address an issue.

"In the Palli Sabha, if we men explain, it doesn't work. So we train our women, telling them what to say in the Palli Sabha. We tell them to talk about all these issues we ask women to present in the Palli Sabha. I tell these things to the women who are in the committee, plus some other women also. Unless we prepare them beforehand, they will not be able to say anything in the meeting."

Male leader of a village development committee, India

Therefore, in the government spaces, there is a risk that women will be instrumentalised by men. Given the hierarchical nature of the space (mentioned above), it is likely that the ideas presented might not be what the women want for the community, but what the men have told them the community needs. This kind of participation creates a disempowering framework where women are merely men's agents, giving their time to gain benefits that do not represent their needs or change the balance of power.

Spaces where the women have complete control over the agenda and decisions have offered the greatest scope for their participation to support an empowerment process. These are most commonly women-only spaces created by Trócaire's partners. In Nicaragua, the organised women's groups (created by Trócaire's partner as a space for women to discuss their needs) decided what issues they wanted to address as a group based on what they needed.

"We make decisions in the way that as organized women we say, 'Let's go and undertake social control (government project monitoring)', as we know how to do it, we say 'let's go' or 'go'."

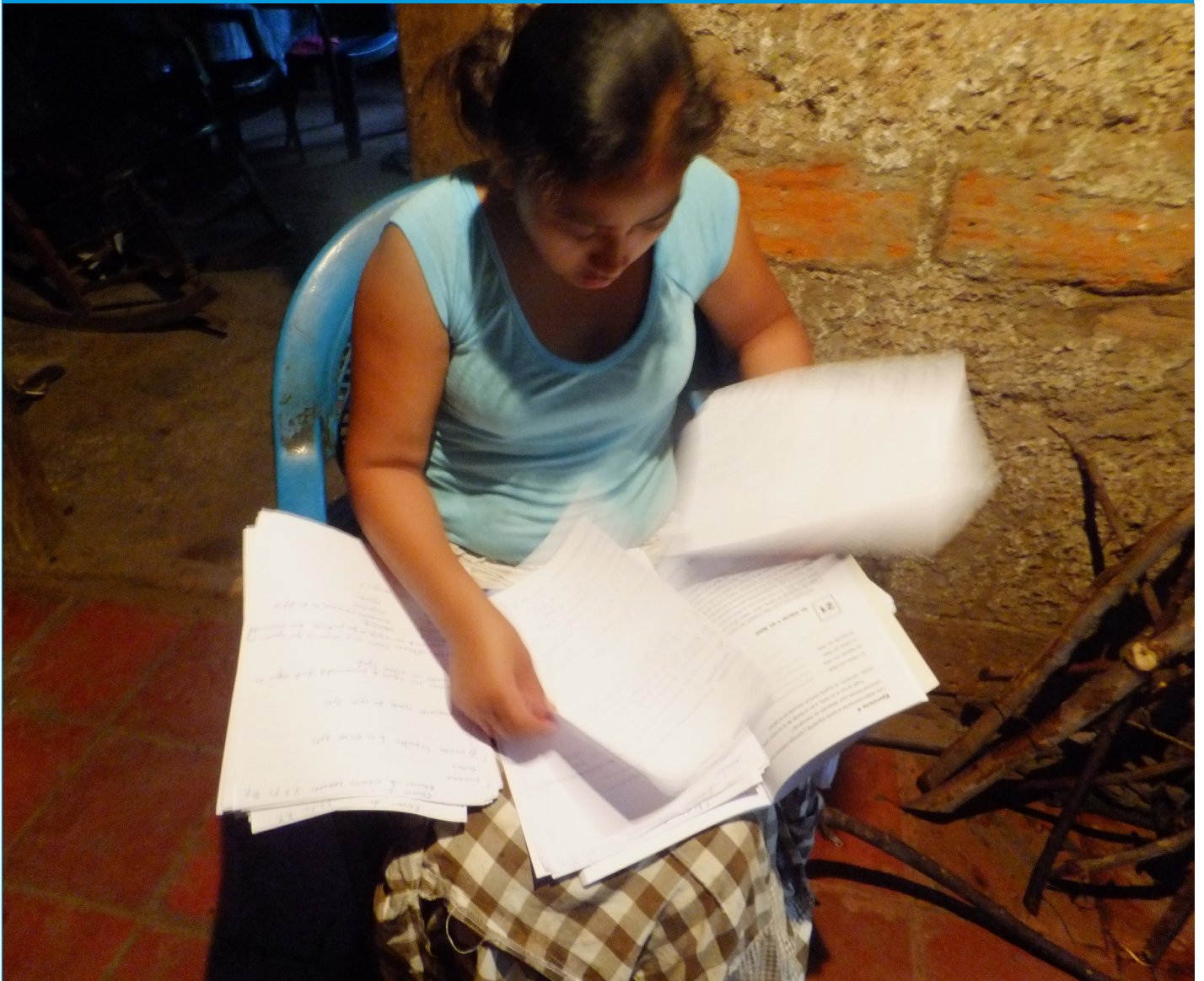
Participant, Nicaragua

In India, the self-help groups enabled the women to discuss issues affecting their lives, and autonomously decide what they want to achieve as a group. They decided to address alcohol abuse. In DRC, the women's sub-group decided that they wanted to raise funds for a sewing centre, to provide poor women in the community with marketable skills, an issue that was not directly related to the objectives of the space as set out by the partners.

The way that a space is constructed affects the ability of women to participate, and for that participation to support an empowerment process. Spaces do not exist in vacuums; they reflect the prevailing power-dynamics in a community or society. An analysis of the role that these power-dynamics play is essential when new spaces are created, otherwise they can risk reinforcing existing divides and entrenching power in the hands of the few, further marginalising others. These

characteristics show that, although it is important to be aware of who created the space, both organic and invited spaces can equally limit the opportunity for women to perform. The question of who decides is really the central determinant of how women progress and engage: Whether it is due to a rigid hierarchy or a lack of autonomy, if the women themselves have little control over decisions, then the space itself is unlikely to support the kind of participation that leads to empowerment. Some of the government-invited spaces, especially the official government-citizen forums, only provide opportunities for tokenistic participation precisely because the decisions are not in the hands of the citizens; therefore, for participation in these to support empowerment, the rules of the space must be fundamentally altered.

3. Exploring the boundaries for action



"She is Paula when she first entered in the organised women's group her husband would not let her go out anywhere, but now she is studying and she is giving classes."

Photo of Juana Paula Miranda Varela taken by Maria Auxiliadora Miranda Varela, Tololar 2, Nicaragua as part of the photovoice activity.

3. Exploring the boundaries for action

The vast inequalities in power which underpin the numerous barriers to women's participation determine the boundaries of action. In some approaches, the empowerment process requires bringing women in to participate within the existing social, political and economic structures, from which they have previously been excluded. In others, the outcome of empowerment requires a transformation of the power structures which are the cause of women's marginalisation and inequality.

For Trócaire's programming to support empowerment which challenges social norms and the structures that uphold these, women's participation and their journeys of empowerment must lead to a shift in the boundaries of power at the levels of the household, community and wider society between both women and men and citizens and the state.

These boundaries are tight, and women's lives are so circumscribed that to push them even marginally is often difficult. Much of the work done with women can reinforce the status quo. Bringing women into existing structures or creating new spaces that enable women to participate is often not enough; citizens need power to push the existing boundaries that prevent them from influencing decisions affecting their communities. A critical consciousness is needed so that women are able to see the boundaries that exist and act to change those boundaries. Participation within the available spaces needs to promote the transformation of the power-dynamics in women's lives, or it can end up reinforcing existing divides and the authority of men over women and elites over ordinary citizens.

3.1 Including women without challenging power structures

The many barriers discussed above can limit women's participation so that their actions are merely upholding the existing imbalance of power within society. The women's participation can sometimes be tokenistic, or at worst manipulated by external players, and can give legitimacy to existing inequalities in power, both between citizens and the state, and men and women.

3.1.1 Between Citizens and the State

Women can end up reinforcing the status quo by becoming instruments in the state's service delivery machine, if they lack

the power to ensure that their voices influence decisions. If the structures themselves are disempowering (i.e. if they provide no real opportunity for participation which influences decisions), training women to engage with these structures without questioning the structures themselves can merely lead to the creation of 'good citizens' whose participation legitimises their own disempowerment. For example, in Nicaragua community involvement of provision of water services through the water committees has been a practice with legal recognition since 2010. These committees are encouraged by the government because they are seen as the best way to manage community water systems. However, in the communities reviewed in this research, the women's experiences demonstrated that in practice the state has abdicated this responsibility to them, without providing the technical and financial support required to function as participatory mechanisms to play this role effectively. Also in Nicaragua, the members of the Council of Family in the communities under review are often perceived to be agents of the Sandinista government, who push party agendas and reinforce party allegiance through service delivery. The agenda of these external actors do not always match those of the women, and therefore the space in these situations does not serve the women's specific interests.

In DRC, the women have to fight for their voices to be heard in order to have influence over decisions affecting their lives. In trying to do this, they must placate the chiefs and have supported the collection of taxes from market sellers. Although this initiative is the women's own, and Trócaire's partner organization has worked with market sellers and authorities on the importance of paying tax and providing public service, the women's tax collection serves a state function without necessarily giving them greater control over how those resources are spent and potentially eroding their independence as citizens.

In India the Gram Sabha (inter village assembly) is so hierarchical that there is almost no opportunity for female and male citizens to speak, let alone meaningfully engage with their elected representatives and the decisions affecting their lives. The rules are not being followed and citizens have no real power within the spaces; for example, the women report signing the minutes before meetings begins. Their participation becomes mere window-dressing, but their presence within the space legitimises the system.

Many of the government-created spaces themselves offer very limited opportunities to push the boundaries between citizens and the state. Decisions are entirely taken by authorities, and the participation of citizens within these spaces reinforces the state's power by legitimising the process. Since participating

within disempowering structures cannot support the goal of empowerment, resisting participation within some existing structures may be necessary to promote new, more workable spaces.

3.1.2 Between Men and Women

Women's participation can also reinforce male dominance within the home and the community. In India, although some women are now participating in the citizen-state assemblies and placing their demands in front of local representatives, they are doing so at the behest of men, who believe that women are more likely to be positively received and responded to by the state. The women become the agents of men, increasing their work burden but not fundamentally altering the patriarchal norms that traditionally disenfranchise women from the decision-making spaces.

In Nicaragua, the women report that now that they are participating, many men have stopped undertaking lobbying. The women perceive this as happening either because the men know that the women will do it for them, or that if men were to work with women this would be a sign that they were condoning women's participation:

"Now it is the women that are more active than the men. I see that most of the men barely involve themselves, they leave it to the women who are organised... I don't know if it is because of their machismo that they think 'ah! That's where those crazy old women are involved!'"

Participant, Nicaragua

This abdication of responsibilities just places a heavier burden on the women, while the gender norms remain firmly in place.

In DRC, the women are still undertaking all of the domestic duties. Even if they are involved in numerous different spaces, they just have to get up early or have less time for themselves. Their acceptance of their domestic duties, and the fact that they don't even perceive them as a barrier to their participation,

reinforces the existing gender division of labour in society.

3.2 Pushing the boundaries

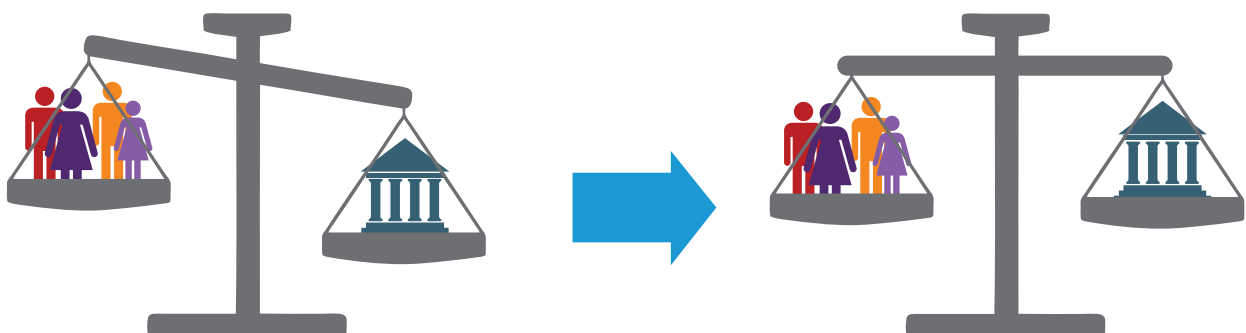
As demonstrated in this report, the boundaries that determine women's action are so tight that to push them even marginally is difficult and may not result in structural change in power relations. Transformational change may be unachievable within a three- or even five-year programme but the research did find a few examples (especially where holistic approaches to working with women have taken place) where the women have been able to take steps to start to push the boundaries of possible action making small changes to the power differentials between men and women, and citizens and the state.

3.2.1 Between Citizens and the State

In Nicaragua the organised women's group fought for a female-only municipal assembly, since men dominated the general assemblies. They lobbied the municipal government to institute a women-only Municipal Assembly where they would have the space to present women's needs. This did not address the fundamental power differences between men and women, but aimed to create a safe space where the women would be able to change the power relations between themselves and the state. The Women's Assembly was instituted in Municipal Policy and was experienced as a real step forward for the women. However, since the elections in 2012, when a new mayor was elected, the Women's Assembly has not been held, and at the last general Municipal Assembly the women were told that it had been discontinued. In this example the boundaries were nudged wider, but just as the women can negotiate new forms of power, so can the Mayor. Ultimately those with political power disempowered the citizens, impeding their ability to actually implement change in the existing structures.

In DRC, the citizens' committees have managed to carve

Figure 6: Power imbalance between citizens and the state



out space in which to present their demands to the local authorities. Given the political context in DRC, this is an important achievement that has slightly altered the power dynamic between the women and the authorities. However, ultimately these spaces will always be conditional on the goodwill of the local authorities until citizens have legal rights and proper mechanisms for participating in decisions that affect their lives.

The opportunities available for influencing decisions are greater in India, where the boundaries are much wider. There are formal spaces for citizens to engage with the state, but the spaces are very formulaic and participation within them is focused on accessing existing entitlements, rather than challenging power relations. Additionally, the gendered barriers to women's participation are still very high. This means that there are limited examples of situations in which the women were able to push the boundaries between citizen and state interactions.

3.2.2 Between Men and Women

In relation to the power that men hold over women, there have been two areas where the women have been able to push the boundaries in their individual lives and their position within the community. Some women have started to challenge the acceptance of existing gender norms by entering the public spaces and some have been able to and challenge their positions within the home.

Participating in public space

In Nicaragua, the women as individuals have pushed the boundaries in their homes. Through a process of consciousness-raising within the women-led spaces created by Trócaire's partners, the women have come to question male domination within the household. To be able to continue participating, most women have had to fight to change their position within the household by claiming greater influence over their own mobility. Many women still

face issues of control and domination from their husbands, but they are actively trying to change these through dialogue and negotiation with their partners. The majority of the women in the research had been successful in gaining acceptance of their participation from their partners. Inequality and violence within their personal relationships are no longer accepted by these women as the norm, but they may not be able to change their realities.

In India, the act of participating within the public space has altered the power dynamics in the communities; previously it was culturally unacceptable for women to participate in any decisions regarding community life. Despite the male control of space the very presence of women in these spaces signifies a shift in gender norms. In DRC, one to two women in each community have openly contested leadership posts within mixed organisations. In doing this they have challenged the norms about women's roles and, although they have faced resistance, these women were elected and some have even undertaken second terms. The male members of their organisations have not only accepted, but come to value the leadership these women brought.

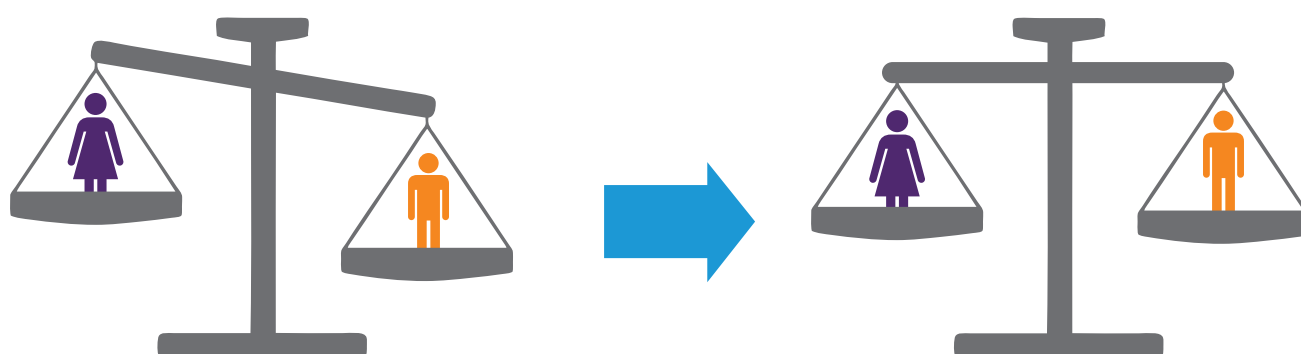
In every country, as a result of their participation, many women report being perceived differently in the community. They are now known, respected and sought out by other community members.

"When we have community meetings as the school committee, the others want me to take on different positions. This is something that gives me lots of confidence, and I am grateful for the faith that the community places in me."

Participant, Nicaragua

Despite these changes, there is still resistance to women's participation, and the women in the research report being verbally harassed as a result of participating in different spaces. Despite some individual successes, the underlying social norms regarding women's position within the home

Figure 7: Power imbalance between men and women



are still prevalent. Until women's participation is truly accepted by men as a woman's right, men's acceptance will always be conditional, often based on the women's ability to bring material benefits to the family. Given the lack of control that women have to ensure that the state acts on their requests, projects are potentially setting women up to fail. Male acceptance of their participation needs to be much more actively tackled.

Changing their position within the family

In Nicaragua, as mentioned above, the process of entering into decision-making spaces required the women to actively fight for greater control over their mobility. The women have also allowed the concepts of gender equality to inform their parenting styles, and have discussed these ideas with extended family members. These discussions are starting to erode the current dominance of the gender norms which underpin women's inequality. They may not be able to change social norms significantly, but these negotiations could prove to be an enabling process for the next generation.

In DRC, the women individually have started to push the boundaries of action within their families. They have taken action to claim greater power over decisions, changing the power balance between men and women. Although it is clear that this has not been accepted by all the family members, the women have been able to claim rights which would previously have been denied to them because of their gender.

The issue of reducing alcohol consumption to prevent violence against women is the closest example of challenging social norms that women have undertaken in the research sites in India. The women, through this action, are challenging accepted male behaviour and pushing to gain greater power, although they were addressing the symptoms rather than the cause of violence. Violence against women was not presented as an unacceptable practice, just an undesired one, and the fundamental belief that women should live free from violence was not part of their analysis in this action. Until there is an acceptance of this, the underlying norms and practices which perpetuate violence will continue, with or without alcohol.

In India and Nicaragua, the women have most successfully managed to influence decision makers when they have utilised numerous different spaces and methods to achieve their goals. In Nicaragua and India, the women have rarely been able to alter the boundaries between themselves and the state by participating within the official spaces for them to 'influence' development plans. However, through demanding meetings and creating temporary spaces with decision makers, they have successfully managed to influence some decisions and have had a number of development programmes implemented.

In all three countries it is when women work with others from different communities that they are most able to

push the boundaries, demonstrating the importance of collective action for change to happen. Given the massive power difference between citizens and the state, even in official citizen participation spaces, transformational change will need to be driven by mass movements. As discussed above, 'power with' is an essential component for pushing the social boundaries and building empowerment for transformational change, yet this is an area where the least progress has been seen.

From this analysis, it is clear that for participation to support women's empowerment it is essential for women to have the opportunity to organise, discuss issues affecting their lives, explore holistically concepts of women's human rights and analyse how power operates in their lives. Many women can then become aware of the unfair imbalance of power between men and women, and take action to challenge this by entering public decision-making spaces and demanding more control over household decisions. However, even when this happens, without more work to tackle the underlying social norms that keep women unequal and often 'voiceless', the women will be left to fight the battle alone, which is unlikely to achieve long term structural change.

The programmes studied in the research focus most attention on addressing women's personal barriers to participation especially by strengthening women's capacities. They are generally not yet addressing the structural barriers that prevent women from participating. While building women's skills and confidence is important, it places the burden on changing structures solely in women's hands. The vast number of barriers found shows the need for long-term programming that builds resilience in women to cope with setbacks and hostility, and that provides a range of spaces for women to enter and participate. It also highlights the real need to work with government officials and men on examining and addressing the social norms and expectations that keep women unequal and excluded from participation in decision-making.

The work is difficult as it involves challenging individual, social and cultural norms that are instilled from birth and supported through laws, policies, religious beliefs and local practices. It is unrealistic to expect massive shifts in the short term. This might require a shift in programming to allow time for change to take place, become embedded and amplified. As the women's experiences demonstrate transforming power relations is a non-linear process that requires a diverse response; 'one size' does not fit all.

3.3 Recommendations for promoting women's participation and empowerment

This section includes a summary of the key learning outcomes of the research process and suggests recommendations to address these issues. This report is

supplemented by a 'practitioner guide' that expands on these recommendations, and provides concrete proposals for their implementation on a practical level. In addition, the individual country reports include recommendations specific to each country situation.

- 1 Conduct a thorough context and power analysis to understand the starting point and the context in which women live: In some situations, the first step for all women is to leave the home. In others, it is not unusual for women to be actively engaged in activities outside the home, as leaving the home and entering into public spaces is embedded in the social norms and roles of women. For all women, their experience of power is unique to them and should be recognised at the outset of the programming. There needs to be an appreciation of where women start from in their journeys and what it is possible to achieve given this. Understanding these complexities is only possible through the use of a thorough context analysis.
- Precede empowerment programmes with an analysis of the political landscape, social norms and gender equality/power relations to select spaces that meet women's needs on a personal, legal and social level. Allow this analysis to inform whether which spaces to work in and what the starting point should be.
- 2 Understand the boundaries of power and select appropriate spaces & processes: Invited spaces have the potential to encourage community mobilisation and become a space that challenges the government to deliver rights or even question gender norms but they can equally increase partisan divides within the community. Ultimately the political reality can disempower citizens impeding their ability to actually push the boundaries of possibility within the existing structures. Meanwhile, organic spaces can create an enabling environment for confidence building and awareness-raising, but has a more limited function in delivering changes in social norms and tangible benefits.
- On the basis of the context analysis, design pathways to influence within existing spaces or through new ones. Design programmes that respond to women's needs and that resonate with the community, to avoid tokenistic inclusion. Programmes should tackle the underlying gender inequality that facilitates exclusion of women from decision making.
- 3 Challenge unaccountable spaces: Inclusion in unaccountable structures can be disempowering and should be avoided. If these structures cannot provide space for more meaningful participation then an emphasis on attendance at them should be reduced to avoid over-burdening women.
- Challenge spaces/decision-making bodies that are disempowering, or avoid engaging with them and de-facto legitimising their position.
- 4 Create and support safe spaces: Safe spaces can play a vital role in supporting the women to help overcome barriers that prevent them from entering more formal public spaces, including male control over mobility and low-self-esteem due to feelings of inferiority, and was a crucial step in their empowerment journey as the women are challenging gender norms by entering the public realm.
- Create and support safe-spaces within which women can take the first steps towards empowerment, including leaving the home and building their self-confidence and public speaking abilities.
- 5 Support inclusive programmes: When selecting programme participants, there should be clarity on where the programme stands on the scale of including the 'most marginalised' or those who are 'influencers and catalysts'. An overemphasis on hierarchy within community structures should be avoided, so that all women can participate in decisions. By working directly with these spaces the project will be better able to support community mobilisation.
- Design programmes that respond to the specific practical (as well as social) needs of all women within the community, and ensure that no group is excluded from participating due to practical reasons.
- 6 Support training and education: Illiteracy affects the confidence of the women to participate and how they are perceived by others. At the same time, the limits of literacy training as an empowerment tool should be acknowledged, as it only serves to address one step on the journey. For some women, the knowledge about their rights – combined with a new found confidence- led to immediate empowerment within their domestic sphere. In some cases, this knowledge strengthened the women's self-esteem and allowed many to question their husband's dominance in the home and further negotiate their ability to participate in different community spaces.
- Support literacy and education for women, as part of a wider approach to strengthening their self-confidence and resilience. Support training and awareness raising programmes to build women's confidence and empower them with the tools they need to resist disempowerment.
- 7 Celebrate success: Successes in gaining access to services and supports reinforced the women's

positive experience, knowledge and confidence in their power to influence decisions that directly affect their lives.

- Acknowledge and celebrate success when it occurs. This has the power to challenge negative social norms regarding women's role in public life and to further women's empowerment by strengthening their confidence and power within.
- 8** Support collective action: By exploring issues collectively in safe environments, many women transitioned from perceiving the violence in their lives as an individual issue within their relationships, to seeing it as a collective issue that was rooted in their gender identities. The bonds between the women also supported those that emerge as leaders, who benefit from the knowledge that they can rely on the support of the women from the women's group.
- Support collective action that focuses on advocacy & lobbying, mutual support and peer to peer learning.
- 9** Providing tangible support: Across communities, women reported the challenge associated with the triple burden of reproduction, protection and community work. Financially independent women who were not reliant on their husbands or families for money to attend meetings encountered less challenges to do so and were more likely to be able to travel freely wherever they wanted.
- Consider providing some material support to women to allow them to attend decision-making fora, either to support them with transport costs or to alleviate the pressure associated with childcare.
- 10** Accept that change and empowerment is gradual and varying: For some women, using the confidence, knowledge and experience they have acquired in the invited spaces and initial grassroots organisations, some of the women began to actively participate within other spaces, with many taking on new leadership posts. For others, they may chose not to progress or may be unable to at a given time.
- Accept that change is gradual, and empowerment is a long term process. Tailor targets and indicators to reflect that true empowerment happens continuously and takes many years to fully realise.
- 11** Protect women from the negative consequences of participation: Supporting women to challenge gender norms can put them at risk of violence – psychological as well as physical.
- Identify protection risks and incorporate strategies these risks can support women to counteract the negative consequences.
- 12** Engage men and the wider community: Individually, women start to push the boundaries of action within their families and/or communities as a result of their new knowledge, confidence and experience. However, pushing the boundaries between men and women should not be left solely in the hands of women; men must be engaged in this process; in their capacity as individuals and as members of families and communities.
- Actively engage men and the wider community before and during participation programmes.

Bibliography

Cornwall, A. (2002). Making spaces, changing places: situating participation in development. IDS working paper 170.

Dietz, M. (1987). Context is All: Feminism and Theories of Citizenship. *Daedalus* , 1-24.

Domingo, P. e. (2015). Women's Voice and Leadership: assessing the evidence. ODI.

Ferguson, A. (2004). 'Can Development Create Empowerment and Women's Liberation? Paper presented at the 2004 Center for Global Justice Wokshop ' Alternatives to Globalization'.

Gaventa, J. (2004). Towards participatory governance: accessing the transformative possibilites . In S. Hickey, & G. Mohan (Eds.), *Participation from Tyranny to Transformation*, 25-41. London: Zed books.

Hayward, C. (1998). De-Facing Power. *Polity*, 31 (1), 1-22.

Newbury, E., & Wallace, T. (2014). The Space between: an analytical framework of women's particiaption . Trócaire.

Repila, J. (2013). *Raising Her Voice: The power to persuade*. Oxfam.

Trócaire. (2011). *Promoting Governance and Human Rights*. Trócaire.

Working for a just world.

Trócaire

Trócaire, Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland
T: +353 (0)1 629 3333, F: +353 (0)1 629 0661
E: info@trocaire.org

www.trocaire.org